







“COVID-19 and the adoption of digital marketing by micro and small enterprises in Nigeria”

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COVID-19 AND THE ADOPTION OF DIGITAL MARKETING BY MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES IN NIGERIA

Abstract

This study aims to analyze digital marketing adoption among micro and small enterprises (MSEs) operating in Lagos State, Nigeria. This state was chosen because it was the worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the reported number of infections and it has a large concentration of MSEs. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic brought changes to how businesses operate. It succeeded in pushing business owners into adopting new business strategies, all in the bid to adapt to the reality of the pandemic and the associated changes. The cross-sectional survey design was adopted; data were collected through an online survey of 240 MSEs operating in Lagos State. The results show no substantial increase in digital marketing adoption during the pandemic relative to the pre-pandemic era. The findings, however, reveal that digital marketing use differed significantly according to sector and size before and during the pandemic. No changes were found in digital marketing adoption in the information technology and finance sectors, while a decline in digital marketing adoption was reported in the hospitality sector. On the other hand, there was a rise in the use of digital marketing during the pandemic in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors. These findings provide an empirical managerial perspective establishing the link between reality and theoretical business underpinnings.

Keywords

digital technologies, social media marketing, micro-enterprises, small and medium enterprises, pandemic

JEL Classification

M15, M31, Q55

INTRODUCTION

It has been well established that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) constitute the economic hubs of both low- and high-income countries, making up 70% and 95% of all businesses, respectively (Aladejebi, 2021). However, globally, 2019 witnessed the emergence of an unprecedented pandemic, COVID-19, which disrupted human activities, cutting across different sectors, including health, businesses, and social activities (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). Undoubtedly, the wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was a major surprise to all the world's countries. The World Health Organization first announced the pandemic outbreak in 2020 (Adhikari et al., 2020). The disease spread like fire to over 190 countries (United Nations, 2020).

Given the low cost of adoption, digital marketing has been reported to promote medium enterprises' business activities (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014) by removing geographical barriers in business operations (Alarcón et al., 2018). Ahmad et al. (2019), Ainin et al. (2015), and Siamagka et al. (2015) have also established a positive relationship between digital marketing adoption and business performance.

However, despite the rise in internet penetration and connectivity globally, several businesses, especially micro and small enterprises (MSEs) operating in Africa and other low-income countries, have not fully maximized the enormous benefits of information and communication technologies (Syahmardi et al., 2021). Thus, investigating the extent of digital marketing adoption among these MSEs, especially during a pandemic, will no doubt provide useful empirical data to those relevant stakeholders and policymakers who can elaborate future mitigating plans, especially for MSEs who are usually worst hit during shocks and the pandemic.

Like other countries, Nigeria also had its share of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, small and medium enterprises were regarded as the worst hit because they tend to be more vulnerable and have limited resources to cushion the pandemic's adverse effects (Otache, 2020). Moreover, SMEs depend primarily on their daily income from their daily business activities. Several preventive and control measures were implemented: compulsory use of face masks, enforcement of social distancing, and lockdown measures. However, several SMEs remained shut down even after the government lifted the ban on movement because these businesses did not pick up on time due to the slow economic activity in the country (Otache, 2020; Ozili, 2021).

Although the pandemic has primarily receded in the country and business activities seem to have picked up, very little or nothing has been done to examine the extent of digital marketing adoption by MSEs during the pandemic. Aladejebi (2020) targeted SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria, to examine how COVID-19 affected the survival of SMEs. The study found a significant adverse effect of the pandemic on business operations and survival, including decline and loss in revenue and salary cuts for staff. While researchers focus more on both small and medium enterprises (firms with 50 to 250 employees), little research investigates the impact of digital marketing adoption among micro (businesses with less than 10 employees) and small enterprises (businesses with 10 to 49 employees).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The vital role played by small and medium enterprises in financial/social inclusion, innovation, and the generation of diverse employment opportunities for individuals within countries of the world has been well recognized (Auzzir et al., 2018).

Digital marketing is the branch of marketing that employs the Internet and digital technologies. It includes application software, mobile phones, websites, and social media platforms or other digital tools (search engine optimization, e-mail, mobile, and influencer marketing) to promote the products and services of an organization or business (Chinakidzwa & Phiri, 2020). Social media marketing is just one aspect of digital marketing, focusing mainly on social media platforms for marketing products and services. Moreover, while social media marketing is restricted to online platforms, digital marketing is open to online and offline boundaries.

Since the breaking out of the pandemic, Chinakidzwa and Phiri (2020), Bartik et al. (2020),

Ganaie et al. (2020), Otache (2020), and Ozili (2021) have examined its impact on businesses. These studies highlighted the negative impact of COVID-19 on businesses, especially SMEs, including a reduction in operations, disruptions in the supply chain, increased unemployment rate to lay off of workers and business closure, agriculture and food insecurity, school closure, and decline in oil revenue, mainly for Nigeria. These negativities ushered in using digital and social media marketing platforms to reduce the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, while more still needs to be done to examine how COVID-19 has caused a shift in the adoption of digital marketing among MSEs, few studies have provided valuable findings that can spur further studies. Using an online survey, Patma et al. (2020) found that perceived benefits and external pressure strongly influenced SMEs' adoption of digital marketing in Indonesia. Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) and Zamani (2022) have also reported increased digital and social media marketing use, especially during the lockdown

and movement restrictions. Chasanah et al. (2021) considered changes in digital marketing among micro and small enterprises before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. They found that a good proportion of the medium enterprises predominantly used social media and WhatsApp platforms for their digital marketing, with 11% of the medium enterprises became new adaptors of digital marketing during the pandemic.

Lim (2010) argued that the hospitality industry, including hotels, restaurants, and transport, has not taken advantage of the benefits of digital marketing. However, consumers are progressively becoming resistant to the conventional mode of marketing, thereby implying the need for the sector to embrace digital marketing adoption fully. Asghar (2012) argued that SMEs who fully integrated digital marketing into their business demonstrated higher growth prospects by increasing their customer base than SMEs who have yet to embrace digital marketing.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is the technology acceptance model (TAM) developed by Davis (1989). The first strongest highlight of the model is perceived usefulness, which explains how users of a particular will want to use a technology based on their perception of its usefulness. The other point is perceived ease of use, which describes the acceptability of technology by the users based on how easily they find it. It relates to the ease of internet surfing to get information and make online purchases relative to other traditional marketing platforms (He et al., 2018; Tahar et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, shopping online provides convenience to consumers regarding time-saving and how convenient they find it when searching for a product or service (Duarte et al., 2018). According to Jadil et al. (2022), a significant correlation exists among convenience, perceived risk, trust, and online purchase intention, affirming the technology acceptance model. Leong and Chaichi (2021) found that the different elements of TAM, namely convenience, ease of use, usefulness, trust, and security, were significantly associated with online purchase intention. The adoption of this model was based on its inclination to digital technology. Thus, within the context of this study, the model is used to determine the acceptance and probable adoption of digital technology during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Al-Qaysi et al. (2020), who examined TAM in social media uptake and usage among students, is one of the further studies that supported this model. According to the study, the most frequent elements that considerably prolonged the TAM were self-efficacy, perceived enjoyment, perceived critical mass, subjective norm, perceived trust, perceived security, and perceived connectivity. According to TAM's perceived simplicity of use, Dlodlo and Dhurup (2013) also concluded that SME operators are willing to employ e-marketing technologies provided they are simple to use, flexible to implement, and simple to grasp. Moreover, Rauniar et al. (2014) discovered the significance of TAM key factors by considering individuals' usage behavior of social media sites and attitudes when theorizing and comprehending these phenomena utilizing an extension of the TAM.

Following the literature review, although digital technologies have gained wide acceptance in the business world (especially among medium and large enterprises), their usage dominance among micro and small enterprises (MSEs) is still to be further investigated. Moreover, since the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a lot of shifts and reactions to sustainability in the business world, the adoption or non-adoption of digital technologies has generated much debate. Hence, this study aims to fill in this research gap. This study is crucial because more data are needed to establish the level of digital marketing adoption in Nigeria, especially during COVID-19. It aims to examine how micro and small enterprises adopted digital marketing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to provide empirical data on the possible changes in digital marketing adoption brought about by the pandemic.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a cross-sectional survey research design. The study population comprises supervisors, owners/managers of SMEs in Lagos State, Southwest, Nigeria. Lagos State was chosen because it represents the worst affected states by the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the number of reported cases (Mogaji, 2020). Moreover, the state is said to have the highest concentration of SMEs in the nation, with over 8,000 accounting for 11.5% of

all SMEs nationwide (Mairana & Udenwa, 2021). This is in addition to the fact that Lagos represents the hub of financial and commercial activities in the country, with over 14 million people (United Nations, 2020).

The study applied purposive sampling in collecting data by conducting an online survey using a Google Forms questionnaire. Only micro and small enterprises who provided their consent participated in the survey; thus, 240 micro and small enterprises completed and submitted the questionnaire online. A Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.951 was obtained for the scale on digital marketing adoption before COVID-19 and 0.950 during COVID-19, indicating the scale possessed good internal consistency and measured what was expected. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions divided into sections. The first part of the survey elicited questions about the respondent’s background characteristics, including gender, age, the industry in which the businesses operated, and educational background. The second part of the questionnaire gathered data on the frequency of digital marketing adoption, and the third – on digital marketing adoption before and through the COVID-19 pandemic. Checks were implemented to ensure all questions were completed to minimize missing data. In contrast, a respondent can only complete and submit the questionnaire once to prevent multiple submissions from a single respondent.

Upon completion of submission online, the data were downloaded from the Google server as a CSV file and then converted to SPSS format for analysis. The study data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Means, frequency counts, standard deviation, and percentages are employed in descriptive analysis; the independent t-test and one-way ANOVA are used as inferential statistics to test for mean differences.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the study participants’ socio-economic characteristics (micro-enterprises with fewer than ten employees and small enterprises with 10-49 employees). The mean age of the study participants is 36 years. More than half (60%) of

the participants are males, in the age group 31-40 years (48%) with secondary education (58%). Most (46%) of the MSEs surveyed have operated for 5-10 years. Approximately two-thirds of the SMEs were registered with the relevant statutory agency (Corporate Affairs Commission).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the respondents

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	144	60.0
Female	96	40.0
Age group		
20-30 years	66	27.5
31-40 years	116	48.3
40+ years	58	24.2
Educational level		
Primary	34	14.2
Secondary	36	15.0
B.Sc./HND	140	58.3
Postgraduate	30	12.5
Number of years the enterprise has been in operation		
Less than five years	92	38.4
5-10 years	110	45.8
Above ten years	38	15.8
Sector		
Hospitality (hotels, restaurants, and transport)	110	45.8
Finance/IT	30	12.5
Agriculture/Manufacturing	42	17.5
Others (real estate, education, and construction)	58	24.2
Firm size		
< 10 employees	90	37.5
10-50 employees	150	62.5
Enterprise registered with CAC		
Yes	158	65.8
No	82	34.2

Findings on digital marketing and social media marketing platforms are depicted in Table 2. The result revealed that the use of digital marketing differed significantly according to sector and firm size before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of the sector and firm size, 87% and 90% of the enterprises used digital marketing, while 86% versus 88% used social media marketing before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively. According to sector classification, there was a rise in the use of digital marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic in the agriculture/manufacturing sector and other sectors comprising real estate, education, and construction. For instance, a 19% increase in digital marketing was found in

the agriculture/manufacturing sector, from 52.4% before COVID-19 to 71.4% during COVID-19. In comparison, only a 4% increase was found for other sectors, from 86.7% to 90% during the pandemic. While the finance/IT sector did not witness any change in digital marketing use before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospitality sector witnessed a decline of approximately 2% from 96.4% pre-COVID-19 to 94.5% during the COVID-19 era. According to firm size, both micro and small firms reported a rise in digital marketing adoption before and during COVID-19. However, among the micro firms, digital marketing adoption was 75.6% vs. 80.0%, while among the small enterprises, digital marketing adoption was 86.7% vs. 90% before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively.

Similarly, regarding the use of social media marketing among micro and small enterprises, the hospitality industry experienced a decline of 4% from 95% pre-COVID-19 era to 90.9% during the pandemic. No difference was found for the finance and IT sector. For the agriculture and manufacturing sectors, there was also a 19% rise in the use of social media for marketing from 52.4% to 71.4% before and during the pandemic, respectively. Also, for other sectors, there was a slight increase in the use of social media for marketing (86.2% vs. 89.7%) before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was discovered that according to firm size, the use of social media for marketing increased for both micro and small enterprises. In micro firms, the use of social media for marketing was 75.6% vs. 80.0%, and for medium firms, 92.0% vs. 93.3% before and during the pandemic.

Table 2. Use of any digital and social media marketing before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Characteristics	Pre-COVID-19 n = 120 (%)	COVID-19 era n = 120 (%)
Use of digital marketing		
Hospitality (hotels, restaurants, and transport)	96.4	94.5
Finance/IT	100.0	100.0
Agriculture/Manufacturing	52.4	71.4
Others (real estate, education, and construction)	86.2	90.0
Total	86.7	90.0
χ^2 test/p-value	56.302 (0.001)	21.962 (0.001)

Characteristics	Pre-COVID-19 n = 120 (%)	COVID-19 era n = 120 (%)
Firm size		
< 10 employees	75.6	80.0
10-50 employees	93.3	96.0
Total	86.7	90.0
χ^2 test/p-value	15.385 (0.001)	16.000 (0.001)
Use of social media marketing		
Hospitality (hotels, restaurants, and transport)	95.0	90.9
Finance/IT	100.0	100.0
Agriculture/Manufacturing	52.4	71.4
Others (real estate, education, construction)	86.2	89.7
Total	85.8	88.3
χ^2 test/p-value	50.477(0.001)	16.415(0.001)
Firm size		
< 10 employees	75.6	80.0
10-50 employees	92.0	93.3
Total	85.8	88.3
χ^2 test/p-value	12.509(0.001)	35.214(0.001)

To assess the differentials in the frequency of digital marketing adoption before and during COVID-19, a paired t-test was performed (Table 3). The frequency of digital marketing and social media adoption was measured on a four-point Likert scale of strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), and strongly agree (4). The question asked the respondents how often they used digital marketing in their business before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, however, a composite score of the questions was generated separately for the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 eras to check for differences according to sector and firm size before and during the pandemic. Then, using the paired t-test, the scores for the two periods were compared, and the statistical significance was verified.

According to the mean score, the adoption of digital marketing was not different among micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in the hospitality sector, with a mean score of 16.4 vs. 16.7 before and during the pandemic, respectively ($p = 0.437$). Similarly, there was no significant difference in digital marketing adoption among micro and small enterprises in the IT/finance sector, with the mean score (17.2 vs. 17.5) before and during the pandemic ($p = 0.106$).

However, there was a significant difference in digital marketing adoption among MSEs in the ag-

riculture/manufacturing sector, considering the mean score (9.5 vs. 13.2) before and through the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively ($p = 0.001$). This is also the same among other MSEs comprising real estate, education, and construction; a slight increase in the adoption of digital marketing adoption was found (14.8 vs. 16.3) before and through the period of the COVID-19 pandemic ($p = 0.002$). The mean difference was highest for MSEs in the agriculture/manufacturing sector, implying that MSEs experienced the most significant changes in digital marketing adoption before and during the pandemic relative to other sectors considered.

Furthermore, regarding digital marketing adoption according to MSE size, a slight but statistically significant change was found in both the micro and small enterprises. Those with less than ten employees (micro-enterprises) had a mean change from 12.4 to 13.9, while small enterprises (those with 10-49 employees) had a mean change from 16.4 to 17.5 before and during the pandemic, respectively ($p < 0.05$). The adoption rate was thus higher among micro-enterprises than small enterprises, given the larger mean difference (1.47 vs. 1.11). Furthermore, MSEs used digital marketing for different purposes, as shown in Table 4. Before the COVID-19 pan-

dem, digital marketing was used mainly for regular advertisement of products and services (= 3.50) and for enhancing customer patronage (= 3.46). During the pandemic, DM was mainly used for improving company brand and awareness creation (= 3.64), followed by regular advertisements of products and services (= 3.62).

4. DISCUSSION

This paper examines digital marketing adoption among micro and small enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic. Explicitly, it assesses the extent to which micro and small enterprises (MSEs) adopted digital marketing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and what it is used for specifically. It was discovered that regardless of the sector, there was no substantial increase in digital marketing adoption among the MSEs during the pandemic relative to the pre-pandemic era. However, digital marketing was found to vary significantly according to sector size before and during the pandemic. According to sector size, there was a rise in the use of digital marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic in the agriculture/manufacturing sector and other sectors comprising real estate, education, and construction. This sup-

Table 3. Paired t-test showing mean differentials in digital marketing adoption before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Characteristics	Mean score before and during the COVID-19 pandemic					
	Sector	N	Pre-COVID-19	COVID-19 era	Mean difference	t-value
Differentials in the use of digital marketing						
Hospitality (hotels, restaurants, and transport)	110	16.38	16.73	0.345	0.780	0.437
Finance/IT	30	17.20	17.53	0.333	1.670	0.106
Agriculture/Manufacturing	42	9.52	13.29	3.762	3.443	0.001
Others (real estate, education, logistics)	58	14.76	16.34	1.586	3.189	0.002
Firm size						
Less than ten employees	90	12.44	13.91	1.467	2.508	0.014
10-50 employees	150	16.36	17.47	1.107	3.071	0.003

Table 4. Specific aim of digital marketing

S/N	Use of digital marketing	Pre-COVID-19		COVID-19 era	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	Improving company/brand awareness	3.39	0.67	3.64	0.55
2	Getting feedback from customers	3.41	0.62	3.51	0.59
3	Enhancing patronage among customers	3.46	0.57	3.61	0.56
4	Reaching out to old and prospective customers	3.41	0.62	3.56	0.62
5	Regular advertisements of products/services	3.50	0.54	3.62	0.52

ports the findings of Giantari et al. (2022) and Bermeo-Giraldo et al. (2022). This was due to travel restrictions, except for individuals on essential services, who operated under strict rules. Hence, digital marketing became an avenue to advertise and promote products because a significant adverse effect on the agriculture/manufacturing sector concerns supply chain disruption.

On the other hand, Akpan et al. (2022) researched the state of awareness and adoption of digital technologies due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They revealed that the period of lockdown restricted and prevented the inflow of foreign competitors into the country, boosting demand for local SMEs' products and services, particularly from the agricultural, manufacturing, and food processing sector. Thus, the aftermath of the pandemic provides opportunities for MSEs to address the challenges that have prevented them from adopting digital technologies. Notwithstanding, Gherghina et al. (2020) have argued that most SMEs' low capital base and funding barriers, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, present an important challenge to finance and raise affordability of digital technologies. Regardless, according to Syed (2019), it has become imperative for MSEs to look for how they can develop and adopt modern strategies for running their businesses and ways through which they can conquer the dynamic challenges that can threaten their businesses' survival. Furthermore, the present study found a decline in embracing digital and social media marketing in the hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic; this is expected, as the entire nation was in lockdown mode during this period. Moreover, accord-

ing to firm size, the use of social media for marketing increased for both micro and small firms.

This study will assist MSEs in adopting and raising awareness of fundamental digital tools and educating them on their significance to acquire a competitive marketing edge. By providing a solid empirical study and offering a set of variables relevant to adoption, this paper serves as a springboard for further investigation into the factors that affect the adoption of digital marketing among micro and small businesses. MSEs can weigh their objections to such adoption and the potential value it might have for their enterprises. This study broadens the understanding of how digital marketing promotes the development of micro and small firms; it sheds light on just how crucial digital marketing is to enterprises in general and how it might affect their expansion.

Since some enterprises can be skeptical about adopting digital marketing, this study sheds more light on ways digital marketing can improve brand awareness, get customer feedback, and reach prospective customers. Thus, considering these outcomes, such businesses are better positioned to gain a competitive advantage in this digital era. Furthermore, the findings corroborated the initial conception of the technology adoption model (TAM) and its implications for MSEs. Logically, the research findings inspire young entrepreneurs to restructure their MSEs and ensure they will be better off if they tap into digital marketing to gain an upper ground among competitors. This will also teach them how to use it to develop user-friendly and valuable market content.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to assess whether there are differentials in the level of vulnerabilities of micro and small enterprises (MSEs) to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lagos State, Nigeria. While sectors such as aviation and hospitality, including hotels and restaurants, tourism, and entertainment, were reported to experience the highest form of disruption in operations, other sectors like information and communication technology, pharmaceuticals, and healthcare were better prepared due to technology adoption. In addition, these other sectors were using digital marketing before the COVID-19 pandemic era, and it was largely used for regular advertisement of products and services, thus boosting patronage among customers.

During the pandemic, digital marketing was mainly used for improving company brand and awareness creation, followed by regular product and service advertisements. It is thus understandable that businesses, especially during the lockdown and movement restriction period, were more likely to cre-

ate better awareness about their businesses online and improve the business brand image to retain old and attract new customers. This is very important given the highly competitive business environment, empirically proving that digital technologies have become essential tools for guaranteeing the survival of MSEs and providing them with a competitive advantage. Thus, the findings from this study have demonstrated a positive impact of digital marketing on the sustainability, visibility, and growth of micro and small businesses in Lagos, Nigeria.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Just like many others, this study has limitations too. The adoption of digital marketing was considered only for micro and small businesses. However, medium enterprises should also be surveyed to compare results in the Nigerian contest. Moreover, instead of analyzing the combined industries of real estate, education, and construction, these industries can be unilaterally investigated and compared. This will give a complete picture of what happens in each industry. Lastly, future research should consider undertaking a study that can explain the factors that could hinder digital marketing adoption. This paper only considered the adoption of digital marketing but did not go a step further to explain if any factor(s) could hinder technology acceptance.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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