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Digital marketing and brand experience on SMEs performances in Jos South LGA of Plateau State

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Abstract
Purpose: The performance of SMEs in Plateau States has been a major concern. This study aims to analyze the roles of incentives and brand experience on SMEs performance in Jos South LGA, Plateau State, Nigeria.
Research methodology: A quantitative approach was adopted and a questionnaire-based survey was used among owners of SMEs in Plateau State, Nigeria. A total of 367 responses were received and multiple regression analyses were conducted using Smart-PLS v. 4.1.0.2.
Results: revealed that (a) incentives significantly influence SME performance, (b) incentives significantly influence brand experience, (c) brand experience significantly influence SME performance (d) brand experience significantly mediate in the relationship between incentives and SMEs performance.
Limitations: This research was conducted on SMEs performance in Jos South LGA of Plateau State; future studies should expand the research to other zones in the State. A cross-sectional study was employed, and future research should consider using longitudinal and qualitative data collection methods.
Contribution: This study recommends that owners of SMEs incorporate digital marketing practices to stimulate brand experience in customers, which will in turn lead to improved performance.
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1. Introduction

The importance of the small and medium enterprise (SMEs) sector as the cornerstone of most economies is widely recognized. The SME sector accounts for the majority of businesses globally and is the growth engine of the economy, contributing to job creation and global economic development (PwC, 2020). SME performance is the ability to create acceptable outcomes and actions (Barde & Ogidi, 2022). Therefore, this relates to how efficient and effective a firm is in carrying out its activities. The performance of SMEs determines their outcomes, such as profits, sustainability, and growth. If SMEs perform best, they transmit many benefits to their stakeholders and even the government.

In European Union countries, for example, there are about 25 million small businesses, constituting 99% of all businesses; they employ almost 95 million people, providing 55% of total jobs in the private sector (World Bank, 2021). In the United Kingdom, SMEs are the backbone of the economy, employing approximately 59% of the UK workforce and contributing approximately 51% of the nation's GDP

(Bryson & Forth, 2018). In Africa, SMEs account for more than 90% of businesses and contribute approximately 50% of the Gross National Product (GNP) (Muriithi, 2017).

In Nigeria, research has revealed that the SME sector is the most dominant form of business, which has contributed no small measure to the growth and development of the Nigerian economy, as evident in the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that have risen to the level of providing employment for about 84.02% of the total labor force, representing 96% of the businesses in Nigeria, and contributing 48.47% to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) (Aigboje, 2022; Worldbank, 2021). Other benefits include contributing to the economy in terms of output of goods and services, creating jobs at relatively low prices, providing an avenue for reducing income disparities, and developing a pool of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled employees as a basis for future industrial expansion (World Bank, 2021). Specifically, the benefits of small-scale enterprises include developing personal relationships with customers, employees, and suppliers, inventiveness, and innovation, which promote firm growth.

Despite their numerous contributions to economic development worldwide, the majority of SMEs, especially in Africa, do not have growth prospects to become large firms compared to those in developed economies (World Bank, 2021). It is a serious concern that SMEs have performed poorly in Nigeria as well as in the Plateau State due to internal factors (such as lack of innovation, improper bookkeeping, lack of succession plan, etc.) and external factors (such as insufficient capital, lack of credit facilities, insecurity, etc.) (Asikhia, Fasola, Makinde, & Akinlabi, 2020). According to Asikhia et al. (2020), 80% of the SMEs in Nigeria die before their fifth anniversary. Most new SMEs in Nigeria do not move beyond the first stage of existence to other stages, such as survival success, takeoff, and resource maturity (Asikhia et al., 2020; Dzomonda & Fatoki, 2019). It is evident that growing a firm to a particular level hasn't always been easy, especially in today's highly competitive and volatile business world (Garba, Kabir, & Mahmoud, 2019). There are still lapses in terms of inadequate Internet infrastructure and cost; the Internet accessibility level remains weak in rural areas; businesses in such areas cannot engage in online marketing because of poor network connections (Njelita, Onyeagwara, & Okafor, 2023); spas and pop-up ads are considered by most online customers as intrusions on privacy (Drozdenko & Drake, 2002). Nwachukwu (1988) opined that the poor performance and high business mortality rate of SMEs are factors that mitigate the smooth running of SMEs in Nigeria. According to Eze and Obikeze (2017), the poor performance and high mortality rate are attributable to market inaccessibility and low utilization of online marketing strategies.

Over the years, successive governments have made efforts through policies and interventions to revamp the SMEs sector, such as SMEDAN, IDCs, NBCI, NDE, and RUFAN, among others (MSME Policy, 2021). However, the interventions have not met expectations, as improvement is very far from impressive. Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) developed the resource mobilization theory of social media (RMTSM). It states that resources, such as time, money, organizational skills, and particular social or political opportunities, are vital to the success of any social movement. "Firms that can take advantage of social media to their benefit have an edge ovsuch asivals that don't" is a central tenet of the so-called "social media advaopportunitiesheory" (Icha & Agwu, 2015). Therefore, through digital marketing and brand experience, SMEs can take advantage of social nota to their benefit and have an edge over rivals that do not" (Icha & Agwu, 2015).

Digital marketing comprises marketing efforts that use electronic devices or the internet. Regardless of what the company sells, digital marketing still involves building out the buyer's personality to identify the audience's needs and create valuable online content (Desai & Vidyapeeth, 2019). The introduction of Internet technology and social media platforms has transformed and altered the marketing environment (Saboo, Kumar, & Ramani, 2016). Its development has provided a platform on which firms, consumers, and individuals can effectively and efficiently connect and communicate with each other. Customers and potential customers generate content online in product ads, providing a feedback platform for firms (Chu & Kim, 2011). These platforms have enabled entrepreneurs, professionals, and laypersons to share content that promotes their businesses (Hisrich & Soltanifar, 2021). These platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, have helped businesses and other activities in several economies including Nigeria. With access to the Internet today, the number of

people who go online every day is increasing. There are about 4.9 billion internet users as of 2021, a 400 million jump from 2020 (Alexander, 2024), and the way people shop and buy has changed. This means that offline marketing cannot be the only strategy for driving sales, because you need to meet the audience where they are already spending time.

Extant studies revealed that digital marketing, in its numerous categories, is positively associated with SME performance (Etim, James, Nnana, & Okeowo, 2021). Examining the studies of these scholars, they returned consistent findings. However, they paid less attention to the mechanisms that sustain the relationship between digital marketing and SMEs performance. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to fill this gap by introducing brand experience as a mediator in the relationship between digital marketing and SMEs performance, which is anchored on the Resource Mobilizing Theory of Social Media (RMTSM) developed by Eltantawy and Wiest (2011). Therefore, this study argues that social media can help small business owners and managers reach more customers, increase brand awareness and experience, and expand their business (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Stephan & Galak, 2014).

1.1 Theoretical Review

To explain how digital marketing, as a network resource, impacts the performance of SMEs, this study draws on Eltantawy and Wiest's (2011) resource mobilization theory of social media (RMTSM). This hypothesis is based on the work of social scientists Buechler and Jekins, who argue that resources like time, money, organizaresource-mobilizingptheorylar social medialitical chances are vital to the success of any social movement.Firms that such astake advantage of social media to their benefit have an edge over rivalsopportunitieson't" is a central tenet of the so-called "social media advantage theory" (Icha & Agwu, 2015). Social media can help small business owners and managers reach more customers, increase brand awareness and experience, and expand their business (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Drawing from the resource-mobilizing theory of social media (RMTSM), this study argues for hypotheses linking digital marketing, brand experience, and SMEs performance. Thus, firms that adopt social media for their marketing have the advantage of reaching more customers and increasing the customer experience of the product, thereby expanding their business, as opposed to firms that do not. Therefore, social media is believed to increase customer brand experience and ultimately lead to enhanced SM performance. Therefore, this theory was essential for this investigation.

In this study, SMEs operating in the Jos South local government area of the Plateau State operate with the expectation that firms adopting digital marketing will have a positive experience with a brand, making them more likely to become loyal customers, recommend the brand to others, and provide positive reviews, leading to increased sales and revenue. This relationship is based on the resource-mobilizing theory of social media (RMTSM). Based on this theoretical exposition, this study tests a sample of SMEs operating in the Jos South local government area of the Plateau State, Nigeria.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

By extending the literature, the framework proposed in this study was based on existing literature that examined the link between digital marketing and SMEs performance and the intervening role of brand experience. As Figure 1 shows, digital marketing was the independent variable, brand experience was the mediating variable, and SME performance was the dependent variable. Extant studies have shown that digital marketing and brand experience are directly related (Akaka, Vargo, & Schau, 2015; Beig & Khan, 2018; Khan, 2022; Zollo, Filieri, Rialti, & Yoon, 2020); in other words, firms that use social media for their marketing activities have the advantage of reaching more customers and increasing the customer experience of the product, thereby expanding their business as opposed to firms that do not, which in turn leads to increased SMEs performance.

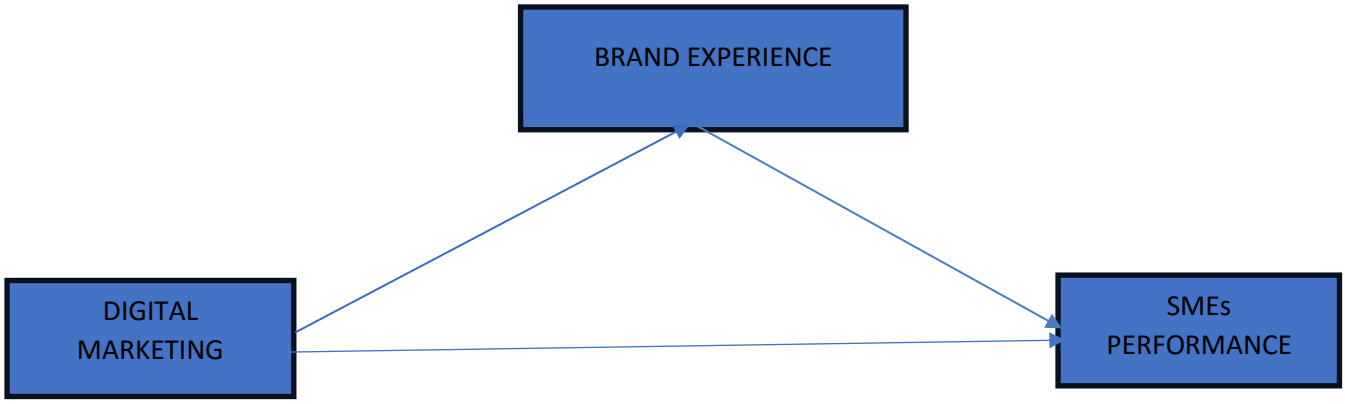

Figure 1: Research Model

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Marketing (DM) and SME Performance (SP)

Digital marketing is an online marketing strategy that spreads goods- or service-related promotional information to consumers. Digital marketing, also referred to as online marketing, encourages brands to connect with potential customers using the Internet and other forms of digital communication (Nyagadza, 2022). It is the marketing of products or services using digital technologies, mainly the Internet, mobile phones, display advertising, and other digital media (Desai & Vidyapeeth, 2019). It offers a platform to share product or service experiences and benefits with other consumers (Santos, Cheung, Coelho, & Rita, 2022; Zhou, Barnes, McCormick, & Cano, 2021). We argued that through digital marketing, people can now, from the comfort of their homes, glance through several social media platforms to be informed of a trending fabric, design, or fashion house that makes or sells the best clothing at affordable rates with high quality (Kennedy, Tobing, & Toruan, 2022).

Previously, the Internet was meant for customer contact, but its scope has now widened. Thus, it is part of direct marketing that involves the process of distributing, promoting, pricing products, and discovering customer desires (Oyeniyi & Ayanleke, 2021). Therefore, we posit that digital marketing is a strategic marketing technique that focuses on creating and sharing valuable, relevant, and reliable content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience and eventually create profitable customer actions. According to Is-Haq (2019), Internet marketing goes beyond the mere Internet and includes mobile phones, banners, digital outdoor marketing, and social networks. Social media marketing is an online marketing strategy that spreads goods- or service-related promotional information to consumers. Email marketing is a powerful marketing channel and a form of direct digital marketing that uses email to promote a company's products and services (Arobo, 2022). Internet marketing has helped SMEs expand their operations and brought more opportunities for the sector to approach customers across the globe (Oyeniyi & Ayanleke, 2021). It offers a platform for sharing product or service experiences and benefits with other consumers (Jamali, Nejat, Ghosh, Jin, & Cao, 2019). It facilitates live chatting, e-delivery, and e-payments, which are convenient, time- and cost-saving, and sustainable (Oyeniyi & Ayanleke, 2021).

Simanjuntak (2002) explained performance as the level of achievement of the results of carrying out certain tasks and the results achieved from the behavior of organizational members. Referring to Yucesoy and Barabási (2016), performance represents the totality of objectively measurable achievements in a certain activity domain. The term "performance" is applied in several areas: economic, financial, technical, sporting, and social performance (Mahmudova & Katonáné Kovács, 2018). Marketing performance is a factor used to measure the effect of a company's strategy (Ferdinand, 2000). Therefore, we posit that company performance is the level of achievement of results to realize the company's goals and the overall activities undertaken to improve the performance of the company

or organization. A company's strategy is always aimed at producing good marketing performance. Farida (2016) argues that marketing performance is a measure of a business that includes turnover from sales, number of consumers, sales growth, and a certain level of profitability.

Halik, Halik, Nurlia, Hardiyono, and Alimuddin (2021), in their studies “the effect of digital marketing and brand awareness on the performance of SMEs in Makassar City,” found that digital marketing (X1) and brand awareness (X2) together have an effect on the performance of SMEs in Makassar City. Sultoni, Sudarmiatin, Hermawan, and Sopiah (2022), in their study, “Effect of Digital Marketing, Digital Orientation, Marketing Capabilities, and Information Technology Capabilities on Marketing Performance of Indonesian SMEs,” results of data analysis show that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on the marketing performance of SMEs in Indonesia.

Etim et al. (2021) examined the e-marketing strategies and performance of small and medium-sized enterprises: a new-normal agenda. This study aimed to explore the effects of social media marketing, online advertising, and email marketing on the performance of SMEs in the new normal era. This study used a cross-sectional survey design. A structured questionnaire was used to obtain the primary data from 295 SME operators. The hypotheses developed for this study were statistically tested using multiple linear regressions with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 23). The findings revealed that social media marketing, online advertising, and email marketing had significant positive effects on the performance of SMEs in the new normal era. Therefore, the study recommends that SMEs adopt social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), online advertising tools (such as search engines, displays, and website advertising), and email marketing tools (such as welcome emails, email newsletters, and dedicated email promotions) to promote their products and services in order to enhance sales and marketing performance.

Etuk, Udoh, and Eke (2021) studied the nexus between electronic marketing and the marketing performance of small and medium-scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State. The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between electronic marketing and the marketing performance of small- and medium-scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State. This study adopted a survey design. Data were collected using a questionnaire. The sample size consisted of 366 SME operators, selected using simple random sampling. Two hypotheses were formulated, tested, and analyzed using simple linear regression. A significant relationship was found between the proxies of electronic marketing (social media marketing and SMS marketing) and the marketing performance of SMEs in Akwa Ibom. The research recommends that SMEs that have not been using electronic marketing strategies (social media marketing and SMS marketing) to a large extent should do so to be competitive and enhance their performance.

Utomo and Susanta (2020) discovered in their research that digital marketing capabilities have a significant effect on SMEs’ marketing performance. Ejeh and Omede (2021) carried out a study on the level of success of e-business applications by small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) in Delta State, Nigeria. Based on these findings, it was concluded that the effective utilization of e-business by SMEs improves growth and development, and enables SMEs to gain a competitive advantage in a competitive marketing environment. Gontur, Seyi, Bakshak, and Awoena (2023) found in their study that social media marketing, e-mail marketing, internet marketing, and mobile marketing are positively related to the performance scale of micro and medium-scale enterprises in plateau states, while search engine marketing has no relationship with firm performance. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:
H1: Digital marketing has a significant effect on SME performance in Jos South LGA Plateau State.

2.2 Digital Marketing (DM) and Brand Experience (BE)

Brand Experience refers to "subjective internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design, identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). According to Brakus et al. (2009), brand experience is a multidimensional construct encompassing sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral perceptions of consumer–brand inter- actions. Sensory experience is related to consumer experience with products or services through the five senses (sight,

touch, hearing, smell, and taste) (Schmitt, 1999). Affective experience is connected to a consumer's feelings, sensations, and inner feelings regarding products and services (Schmitt, 1999). Intellectual experience is related to a consumer's rational thought process aroused by the experience (Schmitt, 1999). Behavioral experience refers to experiences of change (i.e., lifestyle and habits change or behavior changes), actions (i.e., buying), or physical experiences of the brand (Schmitt, 1999). A consumer's emotional relationship with a brand is formed through brand experience, which influences their love for the brand. In a social media setting, brand experiences are mainly created through the Internet, which allows multisensory communication between consumers and brands (Yang, Liu, Liang, & Tang, 2019).

Consumers develop brand experiences through numerous brand cues, such as brand logos, characters, colors, tunes, jingles, and slogans connected with the brand (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013; Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, 2013). When customers are informed via social media about how to use a brand to meet their needs and wants, it reinforces a positive brand experience (Akaka et al., 2015). Khan (2022) demonstrated that online brand experience derives from effective social media marketing activities. Narayanan (2021) explored the influence of digital marketing on the buying behavior of consumers. This study used questionnaires for the purpose of data collection from the respondents of Chidambaram who made online purchase. The respondents are selected on the basis of simple random sampling and the sample size of the study is 100. The data collected for the study is put into regression analysis for further interpretation of the data. The study reveals the finding that the digital marketing has got a positive influence over the buying behavior.

Nasidi, Ahmad, Garba, Hassan, and BaraU Gamji (2021) examined advertising, online risk, perceived usefulness, and reliability as factors affecting online shopping behavior among subscribers of online stores in Nigeria. This research adopted a quantitative approach in which a self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. The respondents consist of 375 subscribers of online stores who had prior online shopping experiences from an online store based in Nigeria. The study used Smart-PLS for data analysis. The findings revealed that advertising and perceived usefulness have a significant positive effect on online shopping behavior.

In a similar study, Udodiugwu, Eneremadu, Obiakor, Okeke, and Njoku (2023) in their study, Digital marketing and customer behavior in the retail sector of Nigeria. It was found that the components of digital marketing had a significant positive relationship with the behaviors of customers in Nigeria's retail sector. Shahid, Paul, Gilal, and Ansari (2022) conducted three studies regarding the role of sensory marketing and brand experience in building emotional attachment and brand loyalty in luxury retail stores. They conclude that emotional attachment is also one of the factors influencing brand loyalty. The results of their first study add insight into how customers connect to brands and become loyal to the brand, offering meaning to brand managers. They found that consumers connected stores to their thoughts and feelings. Beig and Khan (2018) show that SMEs significantly impact brand experience. Zollo et al. (2020) find a strong positive link between SMEs and brand experience. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:
H2:Digital Marketing influence the Brand Experience in Jos South LGA, Plateau State

2.3 Brand Experience (BE) and SMEs Performance (SP)

In this study, performance was a prominent achievement in a specific field of activity. The idea of performance defines how a person or group reaches a final conclusion to accomplish a goal (Mahmudova and Kovács 2018). There are several SMEs performance measurement systems and a wide range of financial and nonfinancial factors (Al-Hakim & Lu, 2017). In terms of financial success, performance measures can be based on returns on profits, investment, turnover, or number of customers (Wood, 2006). Performance is usually measured from a financial perspective. The most frequently applied measures were efficiency, growth, and profit. This approach is considered relatively subjective because of its short-term nature and incompliance with the strategy (Reijonen & Komppula, 2007). Non-financial indicators are better index of forthcoming economic performance than accounting measures and they are useful in appraising and encouraging managerial performance (Al-Ansari, Pervan, & Xu, 2013; Anning-Dorson, 2018).

Feliciano-Cestero, Ameen, Kotabe, Paul, and Signoret (2023) and Frimpong, Agyapong, and Agyapong (2022) show that owners often provide platforms for companies to increase the brand value of their SMEs and venture through the digital space as a guaranteed way to increase sales, create new customers, and ensure customer retention. This is in line with government efforts aimed at investing in infrastructure solid Internet as a way to encourage SMEs' digital business operations. Hosseini and Hamelin (2021) studied the role of brand experience in customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in Ayandeh Bank branches in Tehran. This study employs a quantitative methodology. For data gathering, a questionnaire was used to measure all variables in the research. The statistical population of the study consisted of all customers of Ayandeh Bank branches in Tehran, and the study data were gathered from 400 respondents. The findings indicate that brand experience has a direct and meaningful impact on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty and that customer satisfaction has a direct and significant effect on customer loyalty in the branches of Ayandeh Bank in Tehran.

Paramita, Nhu, Ngo, Tran, and Gregory (2021), demonstrate that brand experience enhances consumers' motivation to participate, socialize, and perceive the benefits of others involved in the brand page, regardless of individual propensity to socialize online. Furthermore, as consumers engage in social interactions within a brand page, they are more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth about the brand, which in turn increases brand popularity. According to Brakus et al. (2009), brand experience refers to the "sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design, identity, packaging, communications, and environment". A brand experience is created when consumers connect with a brand during their purchasing process (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020).

According to the study of Rasool, Shah, and Tanveer (2021), these authors showed that the brand experience with a bank positively influences customer loyalty. When consumers perceive a bank to be responsive to customer requests, it facilitates the overall banking experience of customers by making them loyal to that bank, which will increase the viability of their business. Moreover, according to the study conducted by Yuliyasti, Masdupi, and Abror (2018) brand experience has a positive and significant impact on customer loyalty when using commercial bank credit. This means that positive experiences during use, which are consistently perceived by consumers, form stronger loyalty among consumers toward a brand (Yuliyasti et al., 2018), which encourages repeat patronage.

Brand experience interacts significantly with store image to improve consumers' emotional attachment to a brand (Shahid et al., 2022). A brand experience is created when consumers connect with a brand during their purchasing process (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). Hwang and Kandampully (2012) propose that it is the emotions that establish and expresses consumers' values by building robust relationships with the brands. Studies have also shown that a brand can connect consumers emotionally and build a strong customer brand relationship by offering a superior brand experience (Mingione, Cristofaro, & Mondi, 2020) this encourages repeat purchase. Consumers' feelings and experiences while they order, buy, or use a product, enter, and control market share, increase profitability, and ensure initial and repeated purchases make the brand experience key (Tang & Tsang, 2020). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:
H3. Brand experience significantly influences SMEs performance in Jos South LGA, Plateau State.

2.4 Mediating Role of Brand Experience (BE)

With the rich information flow in the advent of the Internet, information technologies, and social media, investigating brand experience in online settings has become a key factor since the Internet is a unique environment for information flow compared with offline environments (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). In the light of this, Brakus et al. (2009) posit that the online experience is not limited to physical marketplaces but can also be identified in online settings. Park and Shin (2024) indicated that product experience is associated with direct interaction in a physical setting and indirectly in the case of consumers exposed to advertisements.

Brand Experience in its simplest form can be defined as a set of variables that collectively shape the attitude of customers toward a product, a service or a firm (Yasin, Liébana-Cabanillas, Porcu, & Kayed,

2020). Ding and Tseng (2015) stated that Brand Experience has a substantial direct impact on different components of brand equity (i.e., brand loyalty, brand awareness/association, and perceived quality). Chang and Chieng (2006) posited that Brand Experience influences the brand image and associations and improves a solid consumer-brand relationship.

Maduretno and Junaedi (2022) suggested an indirect effect of Brand Experience on Brand Loyalty (BLYT) via Brand Love (BL). Thus, Brand Experience (BL) relates to Brand Love (BL) first, and Brand Love (BL) in turn relates to Brand Loyalty (BLYT). Eslami, (2020) stated that BE substantially affects perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand image. The results of research conducted by Chinomona and Maziriri (2017) show that there is a positive and significant influence of the brand experience variable on brand attachment. Similarly, Zollo et al. (2020) found direct and indirect influences of SMMAs on BEQ via brand experience. Furthermore, when confronted with tempting offers from competing brands, customers are more likely to choose a specific brand with which they have had good experiences, even if the cost is higher (Dwivedi et al., 2018), resulting in improved customer satisfaction, loyalty, and, ultimately, business performance. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed: H4: Brand experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing and SMEs performance in Jos South LGA, Plateau State.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Setting

The plateau State lies between 8° 37 north and 7° 30' and 8° 37 East of the Equator, with a land mass covering 53,585 square kilometers (Ijeoma & Esaem, 2011). The plateau state is popularly known as the home of peace and tourism because of its tourism endowments. The types of organizations that the researchers drew from in this study included:

1. Trading Organizations: These include organizations that buy and sell household goods and stationery in Jos South LGA of Plateau State. These are supermarkets, chain stores, and other provision stores.

2. Service Organizations: These, on the other hand, include organizations that engage in systematic efforts to provide services to customers or clients. These include schools, transport companies, restaurants, medical centers, and motor and machine mechanics.

3. Manufacturing Organizations: These organizations engage in the transformation of raw materials into finished products. They include a sachet water company, tailoring shops, Gari factory, and bread factory.

3.2 Research Design

In this study, a cross-sectional survey method was followed using simple random sampling to collect data from owners of small and medium enterprises in the Plateau State: trading organizations, service organizations, and manufacturing organizations. This study employed Yamane'sYamane (1967) sample size selection model to generate a sample size of 367 owners of SMEs, given the population of 6,408 SMEs (NBS, 2017). Before the full-blown survey, a pre-test was conducted to determine the content and face validity of the instrument. The participants were encouraged to voluntarily participate in the survey. Those who chose to participate indicated their interest by completing the consent form, which conveyed the study's objective and assured anonymity. The survey was conducted between March and May 2024.

3.3 Research Instruments

A questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale was used for data collection. The independent variable, digital marketing, was a social marketing scale developed by Rienetta et al. (2017). It includes items like "This brand is active in social media marketing." Each item is rated on a 5-point scale. Brand experience was assessed using the 5-item scale developed by Brakus et al. (2009). Items included "The layout of the company's website is appealing." Each item is rated on a 5-point scale. The performance of SMEs was assessed using the 5-item scale developed by Adeoti, Isiaka, Adebisi, Lawal, and Olawale (2018) and Sheng, Zhou, and Li (2011). Items included "Firms average sales growth rate compared with our competitors." Each item is rated on a 5-point scale. The other part of the questionnaire included demographic questions, such as gender, age, educational qualification, and work experience.

1. Data Collection

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires randomly administered face-to-face to consenting owners of SMEs in the three organizations in Jos South LGA of Plateau State. The response rate for the questionnaire was high. Of the 367 distributed questionnaires, we obtained a 100% response rate by targeting this list. Thus, 367 respondents responded to the survey.

2. Data Quality of Assurance

The researchers adopted a proactive procedural approach to minimize common method bias, as criticized by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003), based on social desirability and consistency motifs. These proactive methods include ensuring cross-measures or similarities in item structure or wording to avoid misleading the respondents (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012), and muddling the items used in the instrument to avoid consistency motifs, idiosyncratic implicit theories, and social desirability tendencies among respondents regarding their confidentiality. In addition, the data were input into Smart PLS version 4.2.7. for further deals and analyses.

3. Data Analysis

The data gathered via the questionnaire were analyzed using SmartPLS software version 4.2.7. Structural equation modeling validated the study's conceptual model (SEM). Cronbach's alpha coefficients and Composite Reliability (CR) were used to determine the reliability. The heterotrait–monotrait criterion was used to test the discriminant validity of the constructs.

4. Results and Discussions

Table 1. The Demographic Background of Respondents

ITEMS	REQUENCY	%
Gender		
Male	217	59
Female	150	41
Total	**367**	**100**
Marital Status		
Single	46	12.5
Married	321	87.5
Total	**367**	**100**
Educational Level		
Primary School Level	9	2
Secondary Level	70	19
Diploma/NCE	187	51
Tertiary Level	101	28
Total	**367**	**100**
Years of Experience		
One – Five Years	38	10
Six – Ten Years	85	23
Eleven – Fifteen	176	48
Sixteen - Above	68	19
Total	**367**	**100**

Source: Field Survey (2024)

The respondents' demographic profiles are shown in Table1 above. In this case, there were three hundred and sixty-seven (367) responses, with 217 (59%) of them being men and 150 (41%) women. Hence, there is a fair balance between males and females, with a slightly higher percentage of males. Single respondents constituted 46 (12.5%), while 321 (87.5%) were married; hence, most of the respondents were married. Additionally, among the 367 (100%) respondents, Category 9 (2%) had a primary school level of education, 70 (19%) had a secondary school level of education, 184 (51%) had diploma/NCE, and 101(28%) had a tertiary school level of education. Hence, those with diploma/NCE had a higher percentage than others.

4.1 Analysis of Data

Partial Least Square (PLS) structural equation modeling (SEM) using Smart PLS v.4.1.0.2 software was used to analyze the data. First, the procedure involves assessing the measurement model by evaluating all constructs' convergent validity and composite reliability (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). Second, the structural model was evaluated to determine the significance of path coefficients and other relevant analyses (Hair et al., 2019).

4.1.1 Measurement Model Evaluation

Construct reliability tests

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). The CR and AVE values are presented in Table 2, and the results show factor loadings of at least 0.661, which is approximately equal to or greater than the threshold of ≥0.7 Nunnally (1975) hence, the criterion is not violated. The suggested values for composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha for research are equal to or greater than 0.70, which is considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2019).

Interpretation

Table 02 and Figure 02 show that all the CR and Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.70, which is sufficient. Consequently, the researchers suggested that ideas should be acknowledged as legitimate in future research.

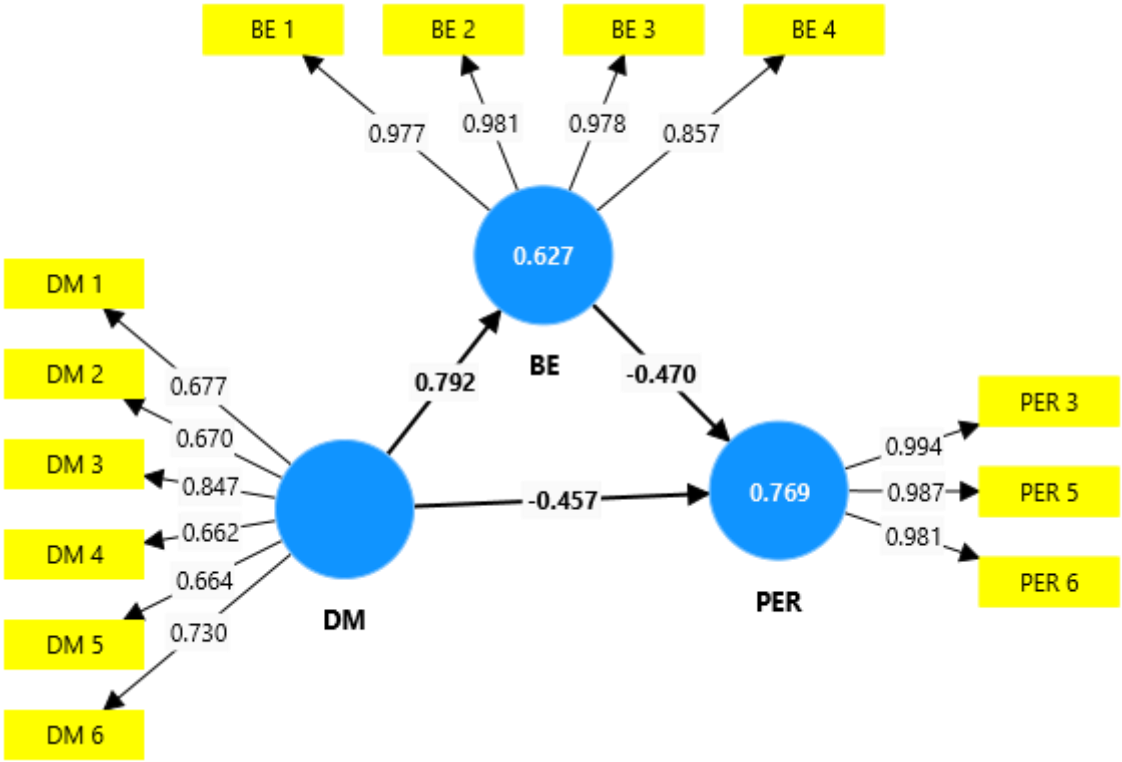

Figure 3: Convergent Validity Testing
Source: Data processed using SmartPLS v. 4.1.0.2

Table 2. Evaluation of Convergent Validity (AVE)

Construct	**Indicator Factor Loading**					**CA**	**rho A**	**CR**	**AVE**
Digital Marketing	DM1	0.677				0.883	0.925	0.859	0.506
	DM2	0.670							
	DM3	0.877							
	DM4	0.662							
	DM5	0.664							
	DM6	0.730							
SMEs Performance	PER3	0.994							
	PER5	0.987	0.987	0.992	0.975				0.987
	PER6	0.981							
Brand Experience	BE1	0.977				0.963	0.963	0.973	0.902
	BE2	0.981							
	BE3	0.978							
	BE4	0.857							

Note: Indicators PER1, PER2, PER4, and PER7 were deleted owing to poor loading.
Source**:** Data processed using SmartPLS v. 4.1.0.2

Convergent validity tests
Hair et al. (2019) stated that latent variables are congruent if the average variance extracted (AVE) is 0.50 or greater.

Interpretation
Table 02 shows that all of the average variance extracted (AVE) values in this study are greater than 0.50, owing to the constructs' clear relevance. As a result, all buildings met the criteria.

Table 3. Discriminant validity HTMT criterion

	BE	DM	PER
BE			
DM	0.492		
PER	0.849	0.611	

Source: Data processed using SmartPLS v. 4.1.0.2

Additionally, discriminant validity was evaluated, and according to Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015), all conservative thresholds should be less than 0.85.

According to the findings in Table 4, all heterotrait-monotrait coefficients were less than the conservative threshold value of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015), indicating discriminant validity has been established. In summary, the model does not raise concerns regarding its reliability or validity.

4.1.2 Structural Model Summary
The structural model was used to determine the large and minor connections after all construct measures in this study were accurate (Hair et al., 2019). These linkages/connections are either accepted or rejected (Henseler et al., 2015). This study used a structural equation model to assess the path coefficients, p-values, t-values, and path coefficient outcomes. To test the research hypotheses, we performed a two-tailed t-test with a significance level of 5%. The coefficients are statistically significant when the estimated t-value is greater than a significance level of 1.96.

The results of the structural model analysis began by assessing collinearity issues using the variance inflation factor (VIF). Table 4b shows that the VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 2.680, which was less than the 3.33 threshold value (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006), indicating that the collinearity criteria were not violated.

Furthermore, hypothesized relationships were assessed using bootstrapping estimation with 5,000 subsamples (Streukens & Leroi-Werelds, 2016). The direct path coefficients show the links between digital marketing and SMEs performance (H1), Digital Marketing and Brand Experience (H2), and brand experience and SMEs performance (H3). Following Nitzl, Roldan, and Cepeda (2016), we evaluate the proposed mediation effect of brand experience. Table 4b shows that, in H4, Brand Experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing and SMEs performance (7.044 and p-value < 0.000).

Overall, the explanatory power of all proposed paths ranged from 0.627% to 0.769% (Table 5), which is considered moderate based on Cohen (1988). The effect size f2 of the latent constructs in the model was assessed as 0.357 (small), 1.680 (medium), and 0.337 (small), which is in line with Cohen (1988). The predictive relevance Q2 was analyzed through the blindfolding procedure at the 7th omission distance to determine the predictive relevance of the indicators in the structural model. In line with Cohen's criterion, the coefficients 0.624 and 0.675 in Table 4b are considered good.

Table 4. Assessment of Path Coefficient

Hypothesis	**Path (Relationship)**	**Path Coefficient (β)**	**Standard Error**	**t –Statistic**	**p –Value**	**Decision**
HI:	DM->PER	-0.457	0.060	7.638	0.000	Supported
H2:	DM->BE	0.792	0.027	29.711	0.000	Supported
H3:	BE->PER	-0.470	0.074	6.368	0.000	Supported

Source:Data processed using SmartPLS v. 4.1.0.2

Table 5. Indirect Relationship

Hypothesis	**Path (Relationship)**	**Path Coefficient (β)**	**Standard Error**	**t –Statistic**	**p –Value**	**Decision**
H4:	DM->BE->PER	-0.372	0.053	7.044	0.000	Supported

Source: Data processed using SmartPLS v. 4.1.0.2

Table 6. Assessment of Path Coefficient

Construct	R2	F2	Q2	VIF
DM->PER	0.357	2.680		
DM->BE	0.627	1.680	0.624	1.000
BE->PER	0.769	0.337	0.675	2.680

Source: Data processed using SmartPLS v. 4.1.0.2

4.2 Findings and Discussions

This study investigates the role of digital marketing, brand experience, and SME performance in Jos-Plateau State, Nigeria.

First, the results indicate that digital marketing significantly affects SMEs' performance. This signifies that the first hypothesis and objective, which states that digital marketing has a significant effect on SMEs performance in Jos South LGA, Plateau State, are supported. This is supported by the findings of Halik et al. (2021), who hold that digital marketing (X1) and brand awareness (X2) together have an effect on the performance of SMEs in Makassar City. Consistent with this study, Utomo and Susanta (2020) discovered that digital marketing capabilities have a significant effect on SMEs' marketing performance. This indicates that SMEs that adopt social media for their operations will increase their customer brand experience, which ultimately leads to enhanced performance. This aligns with the premise of the Resource Mobilizing Theory of Social Media (RMTSM) developed by Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), who argue that resources like time, money, organizational skills, and particular social or political chances are vital to the success of any social movement.

Second, the results reveal that digital marketing significantly affects brand experience. Thus, the second hypothesis, which states that digital marketing influences brand experience in Jos South LGA, Plateau State, is supported. The study findings indicate that, in a social media setting, brand experiences are mainly created through the Internet, which allows multisensory communication between consumers and brands (Yang et al., 2019). This result is consistent with Khan (2022), who demonstrated that online brand experiences are derived from effective social media marketing activities. Tafesse (2016) states that social media brand pages use rich media and promote interactivity, which leads to a better brand experience. When customers are informed via social media about how to use a brand to meet their needs and wants, it reinforces a positive brand experience (Akaka et al., 2015). This is in line with the resource mobilization theory, which emphasizes that social media can help small business owners and managers reach more customers, increase brand awareness and experience, and expand their businesses (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

Third, the results reveal that brand experience significantly affects SMEs performance. The third hypothesis, which states that brand experience significantly influences SME performance in Jos South LGA, Plateau State, is thus supported. This indicates that brand experience has a significant influence on SMEs performance. This revealed that the higher employees' intrinsic motivation, the more ambidextrous they will be to sustain the resources of tourism sites. This result is consistent with studies conducted by Tang and Tsang (2020), who found that consumers' feelings and experiences while they order, buy, or use a product, enter and control market share, increase profitability, and ensure that initial and repeated purchases make the brand experience key and eventually lead to an increase in firm performance.

Fourth, the results reveal that brand experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing and SMEs performance. This is in line with the fourth hypothesis, which states that brand experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing and SME performance in Jos South LGA, Plateau State. This result indicates that brand experience is the mechanism through which the relationship between digital marketing and SMEs performance will continue to thrives. This implies that when SMEs adopt digital marketing, it results in improved customer satisfaction and loyalty and ultimately increases business performance.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between digital marketing, brand experience, and SMEs performance in a Plateau State. The results revealed a significant relationship between digital marketing and SMEs performance in Plateau State; digital marketing significantly influences brand experience, and brand experience significantly influences SMEs performance in the Plateau State. Brand experience mediates the relationship between digital marketing and SMEs performance on a plateau. These results also have important implications for SME owners. Firms that use social media for their marketing

activities have the advantage of reaching more customers and increasing the customer experience of the product, thereby expanding their business, as opposed to firms that do not.

5.2 Limitations and suggestions for further studies

There are certain limitations to the existing studies. First, the study focuses on SMEs in Plateau State; therefore, future studies should expand the research to the north-central geographical region of Nigeria. Second, a cross-sectional study was employed, and future studies should consider using longitudinal and qualitative methods to collect data from SME owners. Third, there are other variables such as job satisfaction, customer relations, and product innovation. This will further explain the additional mechanisms, apart from brand experience, that strengthen the relationship.

5.3 Suggestion/Implication

5.3.1 Theoretical implications

This study adds to the literature by empirically testing a theoretical framework that offers a context in which the performance of SMEs can be improved using social media. First, it advances insight into the literature by applying the resource-mobilizing theory of social media to explain the impact of digital marketing on SMEs performance. This implies that when SMEs adopt social media for their operations, they increase their customer brand experience and ultimately lead to enhanced performance. Second, this study responds to academic calls for further research on digital marketing and SMEs performance. This study fills a literature void concerning digital marketing as an antecedent, brand experience as an intervening mechanism, and SME performance as a consequence.

5.3.2 Methodological Implications

This study provided an accurate methodological process attempting to clearly define each of the underlying constructs, where reliability and validity tests were conducted to purify the measurement scales using confirmatory factor analysis. The results confirm the correspondence rules between empirical and theoretical concepts. Therefore, combining these methodologies with purified measurement items, this study provides a useful direction for future empirical research on turnover intentions. Again, the quantitative approach employed contributes to the development of literature related to the performance of SMEs in Plateau State. In addition, this study adds to the existing literature on SMEs performance for academic audiences and researchers in the resource mobilization theory of social media and SMEs performance in plateau states. Additionally, this study makes a significant contribution to the field of knowledge where it contends and provides evidence for explaining the resource mobilization theory of social media and SMEs performance.

5.3.3 Practical implications

This study's results have several practical implications. First, it suggests that digital marketing can improve SME performance. Hence, SME owners need to incorporate social media marketing practices to stimulate sales performance. Second, the government and network providers must ensure the provision of an adequate network and the timely delivery of information from firms to customers. Third, policymakers should develop policies that encourage and sustain SMEs in their various businesses by offering incentives such as tax exemptions and profit remittances, which will increase performance in this sector in the Jos North Local Government Area, Plateau State, Nigeria. Fourth, the government should prioritize building infrastructure to support easy access to and from supply sources. Additionally, the government should increase the security of communities to reduce the rate of criminality.

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