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ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING COMPETENCIES ON ENTREPRENEURIAL PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

Prof. I. C. Nwaizugbo, Dr. Obinna C. Ojiaku & Uche Edith Maduka
Department of Marketing
Faculty of Management Sciences
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
madukauche810@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Digitalization has revolutionized the way businesses connect with consumers, reshaping marketing strategies and entrepreneurial practices across the globe. This transformative environment has placed digital marketing competencies at the forefront of modern business strategy. Digital marketing competencies encompass a broad range of skills, from understanding and leveraging social media to analyzing data and managing online consumer behaviour. These competencies go beyond basic internet usage to include fundamental elements of digital marketing such as social media marketing and email marketing. While digital marketing strategies can optimize business reach and customer engagement, the inability to create compelling online content and manage digital interactions undermines these potential benefits. Without proper knowledge of digital tools such as social media marketing and email marketing, women entrepreneurs may struggle to maximize their online presence, attract customers and increase sales. Identifying the key competencies required to thrive in a digital economy will not only help women entrepreneurs enhance their business performance but also contribute to economic development and job creation. Drawing resource-based theory and digital marketing competencies framework, this study investigated the role of digital marketing competencies on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria. In specific terms, the study ascertained the role of social media marketing competency and email marketing competency on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria. Based on a survey research design, data were collected from a cross-section of 265 women entrepreneurs across the five southeast states. Two hypotheses were stated and tested using structural equation modelling via AMOS v. 23. The result showed that social media marketing and email marketing have positive and significant effect on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria. It was therefore recommended that women entrepreneurs should deliberately integrate platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp into their business strategies. Beyond casual posting, entrepreneurs should adopt advanced practices such as paid advertising, analytics, and customer engagement campaigns to maximize impact. They should also adopt email automation tools to send personalized messages, promotional offers and newsletters to customers.

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Social media and email marketing competencies significantly contribute to performance, reflecting the increasing centrality of digital tools in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Competencies, Entrepreneurial Performance, Women Entrepreneurs, Social Media Marketing Competency, Email Marketing Competency

Introduction

Digitalization has revolutionized the way businesses connect with consumers, reshaping marketing strategies and entrepreneurial practices across the globe. Over the past two decades, rapid advancements in technology have not only transformed traditional marketing channels but have also led to the emergence of digital marketing as a critical competitive asset. Companies that fail to evolve beyond conventional methods risk losing their competitive edge, as digital platforms now offer innovative ways to attract, engage, and retain customers (Herhausen et al., 2020; Acayip, Kirselioglu, & Akel, 2024).

This transformative environment has placed digital marketing competencies at the forefront of modern business strategy. Digital marketing competencies encompass a broad range of skills, from understanding and leveraging social media to analyzing data and managing online consumer behaviour. These competencies empower entrepreneurs to optimize operational processes and broaden market reach, making digital literacy not just an asset but a necessity. In the view of Saputri et al. (2022) and Intaratat (2022), the ability to navigate digital tools from mobile applications to e-commerce platforms determines whether a business can successfully compete in today's technology-driven market.

These competencies go beyond basic internet usage and require an understanding of various digital tools, marketing strategies and data analytics. The fundamental elements of digital marketing include social media marketing, content marketing, SEO, email marketing, web design and pay-per-click advertising (PPC) (Papageorgiou, Mihai, Ioannou, Marouchou, and Marneros, 2020). Entrepreneurs who develop these skills can create targeted marketing campaigns, engage customers effectively and measure the impact of their efforts. For women entrepreneurs, having strong digital marketing competencies can be a game-changer in expanding their businesses. Skills such as social media strategy, content creation, search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing and online customer engagement play an important role in business success. Within the context of this study, digital marketing competencies focused only on social media marketing and email marketing.

Social media marketing involves creating and managing content on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and Twitter to engage customers and drive sales. Ezenwafor, Onokpaunu, Michel, Nna-

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Emmanuel and Sarah (2017) noted that social media marketing as a modern marketing tool empowers business organizations to use social media platforms to bring their business activities closer to consumers in and out of the marketplace. When used effectively, can help businesses build brand loyalty, foster direct customer relationships and increase visibility in a competitive digital marketplace. Another crucial aspect of digital marketing competencies is email marketing.

Email marketing allows entrepreneurs to build direct relationships with customers through personalized messages and promotional offers. It is a means of conveying marketing communication to recipients who primarily request for it (Makau, 2020). It includes the use of newsletters, acquisition emails, retention emails, and promotional emails to engage, promote and improve business performance. This strategy not only helps in customer retention but also increases conversion rates by delivering targeted content that meets the specific needs of potential buyers. Tiwari (2024) noted that email marketing provides measurable results through analytics that allow businesses to track open rates, click-through rates and overall engagement. By continuously refining campaigns based on these insights, businesses especially women entrepreneurs who often face resource and capability constraints can optimize their email marketing for greater impact and return on investment.

A well-structured digital marketing strategy ties all these elements together, helping entrepreneurs set clear goals, identify their target audience and implement the most effective online marketing techniques to maximize their business reach. Mastering these competencies can enable women entrepreneurs improve their visibility and enhance their entrepreneurial performance in today's competitive market. Among the most investigated factors that may have negative effect on entrepreneurial performance is digital marketing competencies (Papageorgiou et al., 2020; Hendiarto, Rosmayanti, Sanusi and Febrianti, 2021). Previous research has limited understanding of the roles of digital marketing competencies on the entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs (Alonso et al., 2021; Tessitore et al., 2021). Also, literature has scantly studied the digital marketing competencies as it relates to entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Digital marketing offers transformative advantages for small businesses by enabling targeted, cost-effective customer engagement. However, many enterprises still struggle with adopting and utilizing these digital strategies effectively. In Nigeria, women entrepreneurs face unique challenges in harnessing digital marketing due to persistent resource constraints, limited digital literacy, and the broader digital gender divide. While digital marketing strategies can optimize business reach and customer

engagement (Nanga, 2015), the inability to create compelling online content and manage digital interactions undermines these potential benefits (Kithinji, 2014; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

Social media is frequently reported as affordable, easy to adopt and effective for visibility and customer engagement. However, with rapid platform shifts (TikTok, influencers, AI tools), keeping abreast of these technological changes is usually challenging for entrepreneurs. Another digital marketing competency capable of improving a firm's performance is email marketing. However, it has received limited attention in the marketing literature (Zhang, 2010). These capabilities may not come easily to women entrepreneurs who are mostly digitally naive.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of digital marketing in business growth; yet there is still a gap in research focusing specifically on the digital marketing competencies required for women entrepreneurs. Many women-led businesses continue to rely on traditional marketing methods, which may not be sufficient in today's competitive digital economy. Without proper knowledge of digital tools such as social media marketing and email marketing, women entrepreneurs may struggle to maximize their online presence, attract customers and increase sales. Identifying the key competencies required to thrive in a digital economy will not only help women entrepreneurs enhance their business performance but also contribute to economic development and job creation. This study, therefore, aimed to bridge this gap by providing insights into the digital marketing competencies that can drive business growth, sustainability and competitiveness among women entrepreneurs.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to investigate the role of digital marketing competencies on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria. The specific objectives were to:

1. ascertain the role of social media marketing competency on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria.
2. ascertain the role of email marketing competency on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the role of social media marketing competency on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria?
2. What is the role of email marketing competency on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria?

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Research Hypotheses

$H0_1$: Social media marketing competency has no significant role on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria.

$H0_2$: Email marketing competency has no significant role on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria

Methodology

The researcher adopted descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised women entrepreneurs of Southeast Nigeria extraction. Therefore, the population of this study was 8.7% of 3.7 million. That was 321, 900. However, this number consist of both men and women owned enterprise. The sample size was calculated based on formula of Krejcie & Morgan (1970) as shown below.

$$s = X^2NP(1-P) \div \left[d^2(N-1) + X^2P(1-P)\right]$$

s = required sample size.
X^2 = the table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level (3.841).
N = the population size.
P = the population proportion (assumed to be 0.50 since this would provide the maximum sample size).
d = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (0.05).

$S = 3.841^2 [(321, 900) (0.05) (1 – 0.05)]/ [0.05^2 (321, 900- 1) + 3.841^2 (321, 900) (1 - 321, 900]$
$S \approx 805.448125/225530$
≈ 279.9. Therefore, the sample size is approx. 280

To access and reach respondents for the purpose of data collection, the non-probability sampling technique will be used. Specifically, a purposive sampling method was used to collect the data from women entrepreneurs in South-east, Nigeria. An instrument titled 'Digital Marketing Competencies Scale (DSM)' was used to measure digital marketing competencies. The instrument contained sections A and B. Section A collected data on the profile of the respondent, Section B collected data relating to the study objectives of digital marketing competencies and entrepreneurial performance. All items in the instrument were anchored on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, ranging from 1 as strongly disagree to 5 as strongly agree. The questionnaire was self-administered by the researcher and some assistants. To ensure reliability of the research instrument, a pre-test was done on subsample of women entrepreneurs in Southeast, Nigeria. An alpha coefficient of at least 0.70 has a relatively high internal consistency, therefore, reflects and that it can be used to generalize on the opinions of the target population. The data collected were pre-coded for ease of analysis. The respondents' profile was reported using frequencies and simple percentages. Factor

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analysis was used for data reduction. The hypotheses formulated were tested using structural equation modeling via AMOS v. 23 and the p-value was set at 5% level ($p < 0.05$). In other words, we accept the alternate and reject the null when p is less than 0.05 and *vice versa.*

Administration of Instrument

Consistent with the sample size determined at 280, copies of questionnaire were distributed to women entrepreneurs across the southeast state prorated according to the population for each state. After completion, 265 copies of the questionnaire instruments were returned, representing 94.64 % return rate.

Table 1 below shows the distribution and collection of questionnaires**.**

	Distributed		Returned	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Abia	57	20.32	55	20.75
Anambra	57	20.49	55	20.75
Ebonyi	30	10.68	26	9.81
Enugu	68	24.33	64	24.15
Imo	68	24.17	65	24.53
Total	280	100	265	100

Table 1 presents the marital status of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria. Out of the 265 respondents, 177 (66.8%) were married, while 88 (33.2%) were single. The findings indicate that the majority of women entrepreneurs in the sample are married. This aligns with the demographic realities in Nigeria, where marriage is culturally encouraged and often coincides with economic participation. age distribution of women entrepreneurs. The largest proportion of respondents fall within the 36–45 years age group (39.6%), followed by those aged 26–35 years (32.5%). Respondents aged 46–55 years make up 16.6%, while the youngest category, 18–25 years, represents 8.7%. Only 2.6% of respondents are aged 56 years and above. The age distribution suggests that entrepreneurship among women in Southeast Nigeria is concentrated in the middle-age groups (26–45 years). The majority of respondents reported having 4–6 years of experience (37.7%), followed by 1–3 years (30.2%). About 18.1% had 7–10 years of experience, while 8.7% had been in business for less than one year. Only 5.3% of the respondents reported having more than 10 years of entrepreneurial experience. The distribution shows that most women entrepreneurs are still in the early to mid-stages of their business journey, with fewer seasoned entrepreneurs exceeding 10 years of operation.

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Survey Responses

Table 2 **Social Media Marketing Competency**

		Valid SD	D	UD	A	SA	Total
SMMC1	Frequency	5	25	137	89	9	265
	Percent	1.9	9.4	51.7	33.6	3.4	100.0
SMMC2	Frequency	4	28	132	92	9	265
	Percent	1.5	10.6	49.9	34.7	3.4	100.0
SMMC3	Frequency	4	26	138	88	9	265
	Percent	1.5	9.8	52.1	33.2	3.4	100.0
SMMC4	Frequency	3	24	139	90	9	265
	Percent	1.1	9.1	52.5	33.9	3.4	100.0

Most respondents reported being neutral (≈50–52%) or agreed (≈33–35%) that they were competent in social media marketing. Only about 3–4% strongly agreed, while 9–11% disagreed, as shown in table 2. The high proportion of neutral responses suggests that many are limited to basic use (posting and chatting) rather than advanced strategies such as targeted advertising or analytics.

Table 3 **Email Marketing Competencies**

		Valid SD	D	UD	A	SA	Total
EMC1	Frequency	8	12	121	99	25	265
	Percent	3.0	4.5	45.7	37.4	9.4	100.0
EMC2	Frequency	6	20	132	84	23	265
	Percent	2.3	7.5	49.8	31.7	8.7	100.0
EMC3	Frequency	4	10	114	107	30	265
	Percent	1.5	3.8	43.0	40.4	11.3	100.0

Table 3 shows that for the three e-mail marketing items, 31–40% agreed and 9–11% strongly agreed, while around 45–50% were undecided. Few respondents (2–8%) disagreed. Email marketing is relatively more established compared to content and search engine marketing.

Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

The structural model was assessed using several goodness-of-fit indices. The results show: $\chi^2/df = 1.80$ (< 3, good), p = 0.05 (> 0.05, acceptable), CFI = 0.95 (excellent), GFI = 0.89 (slightly below the 0.90 traditional threshold), AGFI = 0.85 (good), NFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.05 (acceptable), PCLOSE = 0.18 (> 0.05), and Standardized RMR = 0.045 (< 0.09). The indices collectively indicate

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that the model demonstrates a good overall fit. While GFI is marginally below the recommended 0.90, the CFI, RMSEA, and other indices confirm that the hypothesized model adequately represents the data. This validates the appropriateness of using SEM to test the proposed relationships between digital marketing competencies and entrepreneurial performance.

The squared multiple correlation (R^2) for entrepreneurial performance was 0.31, indicating that digital marketing competencies collectively explain 31% of the variance in entrepreneurial performance. While this is a substantial proportion in behavioral and social sciences research, it also indicates that 69% of performance variance is explained by other factors not captured in the model, such as access to finance, managerial skills, and institutional support. This R^2 value demonstrates that digital marketing competencies are important but not exhaustive determinants of entrepreneurial performance.

Having established the adequacy of the measurement model and overall fit indices, the next step involved evaluating the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships between digital marketing competencies and entrepreneurial performance. The regression weights from the SEM analysis reveal a nuanced and significant influence of digital marketing competencies on entrepreneurial performance. The results indicate that the proposed competencies have a statistically significant positive effect, offering strong support for the central thesis of this research.

$H0_1$: Social media marketing competency has no significant role on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria.

The hypothesis results as shown in table 4 below showed that the p-value for the social media competency on entrepreneurial performance is less than 0.01. Thus, we reject the null and accept the alternate. Therefore, we conclude that social media marketing competency has a positive and significant effect on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria ($\beta = .45$, $t = 7.18$, $p<0.01$), supporting H1. The standardized path coefficient is the strongest predictor of entrepreneurial performance. This high beta value implies that entrepreneurs who develop proficiency in using social media marketing skills significantly enhance their performance outcomes – such as sales growth, customer retention, and market reach.

***$H0_2$: Email marketing competency has no significant role on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria*.**

Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive and significant effect of email marketing competency on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria. The result as shown in showed that the p-value for the effect of email marketing competency on entrepreneurial performance

is less than 0.01. Thus, we reject the null and accept the alternate. Therefore, email marketing competency has a positive and significant effect on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria (β= .24, t = 3.86, p<0.01). Thus, email marketing competency (EMC) also demonstrated a strong and significant positive effect on performance. This result suggests that targeted communication via email remains a highly effective digital tool for this demographic. Effective email marketing, which includes newsletters, personalized offers, and customer follow-ups, appears to directly contribute to customer loyalty and repeat business, thereby enhancing overall entrepreneurial performance.

Table 4 Hypotheses Test Result

	Relationship			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Conclusion
H1	SMMC	=>	EP	.45	.06	7.18	.00	Supported
H2	EMC	=>	EP	.24	.06	3.86	.00	Supported

Discussion of Findings

Findings from the study predominantly support the effect of digital marketing competencies of entrepreneurial performance. Digital marketing competencies represented by social media and email marketing competencies revealed that all the dimensions have a positive and statistically significant effect on entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast, Nigeria. The most striking finding is the dominant influence of social media marketing competency ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$). This result aligns with a substantial body of recent literature. Studies by Gbandi & Iyamu (2022) in Benin City, Nigeria, and Munir et al. (2019) in Indonesia found that social media marketing had a significant and positive effect on SME growth and competitive advantage. Furthermore, the qualitative work of Brahem & Boussema (2023) and Olanrewaju et al. (2019) explains *why* this is particularly true for women entrepreneurs: platforms like Facebook and Instagram are appreciated as powerful tools that increase product visibility and boost sales with relatively low barriers to entry. This study quantifies that relationship, confirming that for women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria, proficiency in social media is not just a common activity but the digital competency with the most robust impact on driving business performance.

Email marketing also demonstrated a significant positive influence on entrepreneurial performance, the strong, significant effect of email marketing competency ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) underscores its role as a reliable and effective tool for customer retention and direct

communication. This finding corroborates the work of Etim et al. (2021), who found email marketing to have a significant positive effect on SME performance in Nigeria. It is also consistent with Omar and Atteya (2020), who found that email marketing profoundly shapes consumer decision-making in multiple stages of the buying process, as well as Abdulqadir and Amin (2023), who reported its role in encouraging customer purchases. This study suggests that for women entrepreneurs, EMC is effectively used to nurture existing customer relationships, leading to repeat business and enhanced performance, validating its place in a holistic digital marketing strategy.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of digital marketing competencies on the entrepreneurial performance of women entrepreneurs in Southeast Nigeria. The findings provided robust evidence that digital marketing competencies are essential drivers of business outcomes, though their effects vary across different dimensions. The study concluded that social media marketing competencies exerted the strongest positive influence on entrepreneurial performance, followed by email marketing.

Recommendations

The findings from this study underscores the need to provide targeted recommendations aimed at enhancing the entrepreneurial performance of women in Southeast Nigeria through the strategic development of digital marketing competencies. The following recommendations were proposed for practice.

1. Since social media marketing competency had the strongest impact on entrepreneurial performance, women entrepreneurs should deliberately integrate platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp into their business strategies. Beyond casual posting, entrepreneurs should adopt advanced practices such as paid advertising, analytics, and customer engagement campaigns to maximize impact. Training programs should emphasize strategic use of social media, including segmentation, targeting, and measurement of return on investment (ROI).
2. The significant effect of email marketing highlights its value for building long-term customer relationships. Entrepreneurs should adopt email automation tools to send personalized messages, promotional offers, and newsletters to customers. Business development organizations can provide workshops on effective email list management, segmentation, and compliance with data protection practices, ensuring that women entrepreneurs use email marketing professionally.

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