

## Enhancing E-Marketing Utilisation: The Role of Product Quality Strategies Among Small and Medium-Scale Enterprises in South-East, Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study explored the efficacy of product quality strategies in augmenting the utilization of e-marketing operations among small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria. Employing a descriptive survey research design, the study investigated a single research question and tested two null hypotheses at a significance alpha level of 0.05. Data collection involved an 8-item questionnaire administered to a sample population of 388 registered SMEs in the South-East, Nigeria. Face validity and Cronbach Alpha method were employed to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability coefficient of 0.71 was established. Descriptive statistics were used for data analysis, including mean and standard deviation. The study revealed that product quality strategies significantly contribute to enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations among SMEs in South-East Nigeria. Consequently, it was concluded that SMEs can leverage product quality strategies to bolster e-marketing utilization in the region. Recommendations include heightened oversight by regulatory bodies such as the Standards Organization of Nigeria (SON) and the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) to ensure SMEs adhere to quality standards.

**Keywords:** Product quality strategies, e-marketing, small and medium-scale enterprises, South-East Nigeria.

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## INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) constitute a vital component of economies worldwide. They play pivotal roles in job creation, poverty reduction, fostering entrepreneurship, and enhancing living standards (Muogbo, 2013). In Nigeria, SMEs significantly contribute to economic growth, accounting for about 90% of the manufacturing sector and employing approximately 70% of the working population (Afolabi, 2015). Despite their significance, SMEs in Nigeria, particularly in the South-East region, face multifaceted challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability.

Aremu and Adeyemi in Agwu and Emeti (2014), most SMEs in Nigeria fold up within their first five years of existence; a smaller percentage go into extinction between the sixth and tenth year while only about five to ten percent survive, thrive, and grow to maturity. The challenges confronting SMEs in Nigeria are diverse. They include factors such as insufficient capital, inadequate infrastructure, lack of market focus, slow adoption of information and communication technology (ICT), and intense competition (Agwu & Murray, 2015). To address these challenges and ensure their survival in the contemporary business landscape, SMEs need to embrace innovative strategies, particularly leveraging Information and

Communication Technology (ICT). Among the components of ICT is e-marketing, which, according to Jobber and Ellis-Chadwick (2013), aids in boosting the performance of small and medium enterprises.

E-marketing refers to electronic representation of business activities designed to plan, price, promote and distribute wants-satisfying (valuable) goods and services to potential customers. Nwachi (2012) defines e-marketing as the application of principles and techniques through electronic media and more specifically the internet. E-marketing, also known as digital marketing, encompasses various online strategies aimed at promoting products or services over the internet. Electronic marketing is facilitated by various channels such as websites, search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), email marketing, social media marketing (SMM), content creation, digital advertising, mobile marketing, viral marketing, affiliate marketing, online public relations (Online PR), digital media, and web analytics (Bala & Verma, 2018; Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer & Johnston, 2019). It aims at increasing sales, reducing costs, and making SMEs business more competitive.

Internet facilities have been observed to enable e-marketing to be fast and far-reaching. E-marketing facilitates communications because of the high level of connectivity, and it promotes products or services in a timely, relevant, more personal, and cost-effective manner (Baines, Fill and Page, 2013). Generally, sales of goods and services have increased because the internet facilitates globalization and allows SMEs access to large number of targeted customers all around the world. Cost of marketing and advertising are reduced since electronic communications are inexpensive compared to the traditional marketing. It is as well faster to disseminate pieces of information electronically to targeted customers. In the context of this study, e-marketing, also known as digital marketing, web marketing, online marketing, or search marketing, is the promotion of products or services over the internet. Many benefits have been alluded to SMEs using e-marketing enabled by the internet. Despite its potential benefits, the utilization of e-marketing among SMEs in Nigeria, especially in the South-East, remains low (Agwu & Murray, 2015).

Several barriers hinder the effective adoption of e-marketing by SMEs in Nigeria, including lack of awareness, inadequate resources, technical know-how, and perceived costs (Faloye, 2014; Agwu & Murray, 2015). To overcome these barriers and harness the full potential of e-marketing, SMEs must employ strategic approaches tailored to their specific contexts. Strategies play a crucial role in guiding SMEs towards achieving their objectives and staying competitive in the market (Riley, 2015). In the context of e-marketing utilization, strategy such as product quality enhancement has been identified as pivotal in driving SME performance (Ebitu, 2016). Product quality, encompassing tangible and intangible features, significantly influences consumer perceptions and, consequently, SME success (Adewale, Adesola & Oyewale, 2013).

Product quality plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions, loyalty, and ultimately, SME performance. In general, quality is made up of tangible features (features that can be seen) such as performance, appearance, strength, and intangible features such as reputation and exclusivity. In the dynamic and competitive landscape of e-commerce, where consumers have access to a plethora of options, ensuring high product quality is essential for SMEs to stand out and gain a competitive edge. Kotler and Armstrong (2011) posited that a product is anything that can be offered to the market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption that might satisfy a want or need. A quality product means different things to different consumers. It is a challenge for all firms to set their quality level and ensure that it meets the expectations of their target market.

The significance of product quality strategies in the context of e-marketing utilization by SMEs cannot be overstated. SMEs can enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth, thereby amplifying the effectiveness of their e-marketing efforts by focusing on improving the quality of their products (Ebitu, 2016). Furthermore, aligning product quality with e-marketing initiatives can lead to greater credibility and trustworthiness among online consumers, facilitating increased sales and market expansion.

In the context of South-East Nigeria, where SMEs play a crucial role in driving economic growth and employment generation, the adoption of product quality strategies for optimizing e-marketing operations holds immense potential. However, empirical research specific to this region is scarce, necessitating a comprehensive investigation into the effectiveness of product quality strategies in enhancing e-marketing utilization among SMEs in the South-East, Nigeria. It is possible that gender and education are factors that can influence the utilization of e-marketing operations by SMEs in South-East Nigeria. Socio-cultural differences between genders may impact marketing strategies, while education levels can affect SME operators' ability to leverage e-marketing effectively (Kren-Ikidi, 2017).

This article aims to address this research gap by examining the product quality strategies employed by SMEs in South-East Nigeria to improve their utilization of e-marketing operations. Through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical investigation, the article identified the key product quality strategies that resonate with the unique socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the South-East region including Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Imo, and Ebonyi States. Additionally, the article explored the impact of gender and education on the adoption and effectiveness of product quality strategies in the context of e-marketing utilization by SMEs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria encounter significant challenges in effectively utilizing e-marketing operations to enhance their market competitiveness and achieve sustainable growth. Despite the potential benefits of e-marketing such as increased market reach and cost-effectiveness, SMEs face barriers that impede their adoption and effective utilization of digital marketing strategies. These challenges hinder SMEs from fully harnessing the potential of e-marketing to expand their customer base, increase sales, and improve overall business performance.

One critical challenge faced by SMEs in South-East Nigeria is the inadequacy of product quality strategies tailored to optimize e-marketing operations. Product quality strategies can help to influence consumer perceptions, trust, and loyalty, particularly in the context of online transactions. However, many SMEs struggle to maintain consistent product quality standards, thereby limiting their ability to capitalize on the opportunities presented by e-marketing platforms.

Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical research specifically addressing the effectiveness of product quality strategies in enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations by SMEs in the South-East region. Existing studies often focus on general challenges and barriers to e-marketing adoption without delving into the specific strategies that SMEs can employ to overcome these challenges. This gap in the literature hinders the development of evidence-based interventions and strategies tailored to the unique socio-economic and cultural context of South-East Nigeria.

Moreover, the influence of socio-cultural background and educational background on the adoption and effectiveness of product quality strategies in the context of e-marketing

utilization by SMEs remains underexplored. Socio-cultural factors and educational background may impact SME operators' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards e-marketing and product quality enhancement initiatives (Kren-Ikidi, 2017). Understanding these influences is crucial for designing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to facilitate the adoption of effective product quality strategies among SMEs in South-East Nigeria. Therefore, this study explored the product quality strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations by SME in South-East, Nigeria. Specifically, the study determined: Product quality strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations by SMEs in South-East, Nigeria.

### Research Question

1. What are the product quality strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium-scale enterprises?

### Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East based on gender regarding product quality strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium-scale enterprises.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East based on level of education regarding product quality strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium-scale enterprises.

## METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this study is a descriptive survey research design conducted in the South-East region of Nigeria. The study population comprises all 13,035 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) registered across Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Imo, and Ebonyi States with the respective State Ministries of Commerce, Industry, and Technology. The sample size of 388 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula to ensure equitable representation across the five states. SME operators were selected using proportionate stratified random sampling technique. Data collection was carried out using a structured questionnaire based on five-Likert and titled "Strategies for Utilization of E-Marketing Operations Questionnaire (SUE-MOQ)", which underwent face validation by three experts. The internal consistency of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha method, resulting in a reliability coefficient of 0.71. Data analysis involved the use of descriptive statistics using mean ratings and standard deviation for the research question, and t-test for the hypotheses, conducted using SPSS Version 23. The decision rule was set to accept null hypotheses where the p-value was greater than or equal to the alpha level of 0.05 ( $p \geq 0.05$ ), while rejecting null hypotheses where the calculated p-value was less than the alpha level.

## RESULTS

**Research Question:** What are the product quality strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations in small and medium-scale enterprises?

**Table 1: Respondents Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation of the Product Quality Strategies Considered Effective for Improving the Utilization of E-marketing Operations by SMEs**

S/N	Items on product quality strategies	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remarks
1.	Offering product value that responds to customers' needs	4.39	.66	Effective
2.	Building a strong brand identity	4.34	.56	Effective
3.	Effectively linking product brands and customers	4.44	.55	Effective
4.	Using quality delivery strategy to attract and retain customers	4.41	.65	Effective
5.	Placing warranty on products to build more trust	4.41	.59	Effective
6.	Making product quality consistent with other elements of the marketing mix	4.34	.67	Effective
7.	Making quality part of SME culture	4.29	.60	Effective
8.	Implementing quality management system to create and deliver products	4.22	.67	Effective
<b>Grand mean</b>		<b>4.35</b>		<b>Effective</b>

According to the data presented in the table, it is evident that all eight items related to quality product strategies are perceived as effective for enhancing the utilization of e-marketing by SMEs. The respondents rated each item as effective, resulting in a cluster mean score of 4.35. This overall score suggests that SME operators in South-East Nigeria consider quality product strategies to be beneficial for improving e-marketing operations within their businesses. Additionally, the standard deviations, ranging from 0.59 to 0.67, indicate a high level of homogeneity among respondents' responses, further supporting the consensus that quality product strategies play a significant role in leveraging e-marketing effectively.

**Hypothesis 1:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East based on gender on product quality strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations by small and medium scale enterprises.

**Table 2: t-Test analysis of the Mean Ratings to SME operators on the Product Quality Strategies for Improving the Utilization of E-marketing in SMEs based on gender**

Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	$\alpha$	p-value	Decision
Male	216	34.59	1.81	386	0.05	.020	Significant
Female	172	35.15	2.85				

The p-value obtained from the t-test comparing the mean ratings of male and female SME operators in South-East Nigeria regarding the effectiveness of quality product strategies for improving e-marketing utilization is 0.020, which is less than the predetermined alpha level of 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which states that 'there is no significant difference in the mean ratings based on gender', is rejected. This rejection indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of male and female SME operators regarding the perceived effectiveness of quality product strategies in enhancing e-marketing utilization among SMEs in South-East Nigeria. However, it's noted that the difference observed is negligible, despite being statistically significant.

**Hypothesis 2:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East based on level of education regarding product quality strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations by small and medium-scale enterprises.

**Table 3: The t-test analysis of the Mean Ratings to SME operators on the Product Quality Strategies for Improving the Utilization of E-marketing in SMEs based on level of education**

Variables	N	Mean	SD	df	$\alpha$	p-value	Decision
O'Level	90	34.30	1.63	386	0.05	.012	Significant
Degree	298	35.00	2.50				

The p-value obtained from the t-test comparing the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East Nigeria with different levels of education (O'level and Degree) regarding the effectiveness of quality product strategies for improving e-marketing utilization is 0.12, which is greater than the predetermined alpha level of 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which states that 'there is no significant difference in the mean ratings based on the level of education', is not rejected. This non-rejection indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of SME operators with O'level education and those with higher levels of education regarding the perceived effectiveness of quality product strategies in enhancing e-marketing utilization among SMEs in South-East Nigeria. Therefore, while there may be a difference observed, it is not statistically significant.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that product quality strategies play a crucial role in enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations by small and medium-scale

enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria. Specifically, the study identifies several effective product quality strategies, including offering quality products, building a strong brand identity, linking product brands effectively with customers and employing quality delivery strategies to attract and retain customers. Additionally, the study identified providing warranties on products to build trust, ensuring consistency of product quality with other elements of the marketing mix, embedding quality within SME culture, and implementing quality management systems (QMS) to create and deliver products or services, as effective product quality strategies.

These findings are consistent with existing literature. For instance, Kotler and Armstrong (2006) emphasize the role of total quality management (TQM) as a marketing strategy that can significantly impact SME performance. Martinez-Lorente, Dewhurst, and Gallego-Rodriguez as cited in Ebitu (2016), further support this notion by highlighting how TQM can enhance product and service quality in SMEs, leading to benefits such as increased profits and market share, which are essential outcomes of effective e-marketing operations. Moreover, it is noted that consumer perception of quality is influenced not only by the intrinsic attributes of the product but also by the marketing mix employed by the SME, emphasizing the importance of offering quality products to drive successful e-marketing strategies.

The study also revealed significant differences in the mean ratings of SME operators based on gender and level of education regarding the perceived effectiveness of product quality strategies for improving e-marketing utilization. This may be attributed to various factors, including the diversity of business lines among SMEs operators, the skills level and exposure of personnel. SMEs with skilled workforces are more likely to offer quality products, as emphasized by Adewale Adesola, & Oyewale (2013), who highlight the significant impact of product quality on SMEs performance, particularly in the context of e-marketing.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of prioritizing product quality strategies in the context of e-marketing utilization by SMEs in South-East Nigeria. By adopting these strategies, SMEs can enhance their competitiveness, attract and retain customers, and ultimately improve their performance in the digital marketplace.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The study found out that there are several product quality strategies for improving the utilization of e-marketing by small and medium-scale enterprises in South-East, Nigeria. Furthermore, the study also revealed that there is a significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East based on gender regarding product quality strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations. Similarly, there is a significant difference in the mean ratings of SME operators in South-East based on level of education regarding product quality strategies considered effective for improving the utilization of e-marketing operations.

## **CONCLUSION**

Product quality strategies play a significant role in enhancing the utilization of e-marketing operations by small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) in South-East, Nigeria. The effectiveness of these strategies contributes to increased utilization of e-marketing platforms, ultimately improving the competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs in the region. Additionally, the implementation of these strategies has been shown to positively impact sales, profitability, and overall business performance.

As the business landscape becomes increasingly competitive, SMEs in South-East Nigeria must prioritize the adoption of product quality strategies to remain competitive in the global marketplace. This is achievable through provision of value-driven products, building strong brand identities, effectively linking with customers, and employing quality delivery strategies, SMEs can enhance their presence and success in the e-marketing arena.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The findings of this study have several implications for both government policies and SME operators in South-East Nigeria. Firstly, it underscores the importance of promoting and supporting initiatives that encourage SMEs to implement product quality strategies. Government interventions, such as providing training and financial support, can help SMEs develop and maintain high-quality products, enhancing their competitiveness in the e-marketing landscape.

Secondly, SME operators should recognize the critical role of product quality in driving the success of e-marketing initiatives. By ensuring consistent delivery of quality products that meet customer needs, SMEs can build trust and loyalty among their target audience, leading to increased sales and sustainable growth.

Therefore, the study highlights the symbiotic relationship between product quality strategies and e-marketing utilization in SMEs. Embracing these strategies not only enhances the effectiveness of e-marketing operations but also positions SMEs for long-term success in the dynamic and competitive business environment of South-East Nigeria.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. The Standards Organization of Nigeria (SON), National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), and other relevant quality assurance agencies should intensify their oversight functions on SMEs operating in South-East Nigeria to ensure they maintain highest standards and professionalism.
2. Government agencies and relevant stakeholders should prioritize capacity-building initiatives aimed at equipping SME operators with the knowledge and skills necessary to produce and deliver quality products.

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