MARKETING ORIENTATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN CROSS RIVER STATE

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Abstract
This study examined marketing orientation and the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Cross River State. It specifically sought to determine the effects of customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication on the development of SMEs in Calabar. The study adopted cross-sectional survey research design. A structured questionnaire was used to obtain primary data from 318 operators of SMEs in Calabar. Descriptive statistics were applied for data analysis and interpretation, while the hypotheses developed for the study were tested using multiple linear regression in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 23). The findings of the study revealed that customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication had significant positive effects on the development of SMEs in Calabar. Hence, the study recommended the following, among others: operators of SMEs in Nigeria need to commit to the principle and practice of customer sovereignty in their operations by ensuring that goods and services they offer are tailored to satisfactorily meet customers' needs on a consistent basis while maintaining a viable relationship with customers for the long term; SMEs should commit to continuous product innovation by conducting trend analysis in order to provide products that align with customers' requirements and offer the most benefits to customers, thereby encouraging customer satisfaction and loyalty; and it is imperative for operators of SMEs to harness the potential of periodic competitor analysis to design and implement marketing campaigns to counter competitors' actions, attract customers' patronage and capture substantial market share.
Keywords: *Marketing orientation, SMEs, Customer focus, Product innovation, Competitor analysis*

Introduction

The development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) entails the process whereby these enterprises achieve business growth, and market expansion, which leads to increased customer patronage, sales revenue, profitability and competitive advantage (Zafar & Mustafa, 2017). SMEs development not only results in enhanced profitability, and competitiveness for operators; but it also promotes employment, human capital development, and economic growth, especially in developing countries (Obi *et al*., 2018). This is because as these enterprises proliferate, they create jobs across various sectors, thereby reducing unemployment rates and alleviating poverty. In many developing countries like Nigeria, where formal employment opportunities are limited, SMEs serve as vital engines of job creation,

absorbing a substantial portion of the workforce (Olowookere *et al*., 2021). Moreover, as SMEs develop and grow, they contribute to the creation of vibrant and dynamic business ecosystems, fostering entrepreneurship and innovation across various domains (*Olaore et al.*, 2021). This diversification not only enhances economic resilience but also reduces dependence on volatile sectors, thereby promoting stability and sustainability in the long term.

As such, several scholars have sought strategic approaches which could be implemented to solidify and reinforce the development of SMEs in developing countries; and marketing orientation is one of them (Puspaningrum, 2020; Riswanto *et al*., 2020; Ali *et al*., 2020). According to Länsiluoto *et al*. (2019), marketing orientation is a business approach where business organizations focus on understanding and satisfying the needs and wants of their target customers through effective marketing strategies in order to gain sustainable competitive advantage. In contemporary times, business organizations, especially large-scale firms have been observed to be integrating the marketing orientation into their operations in a bid to enhance their competitiveness and operational performance (Acosta *et al*., 2018). This is because in today's highly competitive and dynamic market environment, understanding and satisfying customer needs is paramount for business success (Udriyah *et al*., 2019). By adopting a marketing orientation, companies shift their focus from solely producing goods or services to identifying and meeting customer demands effectively. This customer-centric approach allows businesses to stay attuned to market trends, consumer preferences, and emerging needs, enabling them to develop products that resonate with their target audience (Puspaningrum, 2020).

Moreover, with the advent of digital technologies and the proliferation of online platforms, consumers have more choices and access to information than ever before (Gulve, 2021). As a result, they have become increasingly discerning and demanding, expecting personalized experiences and meaningful interactions with brands. Integrating a marketing orientation enables companies to leverage data analytics and customer insights to tailor their offerings and communication strategies to individual preferences, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Mamun *et al*., 2018). However, in Nigeria, the full-scale integration of the marketing orientation into the operations of SMEs still faces significant hurdles, such as limited resources, lack of marketing enlightenment and education, limited marketing research capabilities and overemphasis on profitability by SMEs operators (Aminu, 2018). As a consequence, a number of SMEs in Nigeria find it difficult to compete and keep pace with their large-scale counterparts, who are harnessing their expertise in marketing to dominate the market. This study was therefore carried out to determine the most effective manner in which marketing orientation dimensions (customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication) could be implemented by SMEs in Calabar to enhance their business development.

Problem statement

Despite the potential benefits of the marketing orientation to business organizations in contemporary times, SMEs still face difficulties in holistically integrating this orientation into their full-scale operations (Al Badi, 2018). Their inability to holistically integrate and practice the marketing orientation is caused by factors inherent to the nature and structure of SMEs, as well as external market conditions (Amin, 2021). One of these factors is the challenge of limited resources due to the fact that unlike larger corporations, SMEs typically operate with constrained budgets, manpower, and expertise (Bocconcelli *et al*., 2018). As such, they may prioritize immediate operational needs such as day-to-day survival, managing cash flow or fulfilling immediate customer demands, rather than investing in comprehensive marketing strategies. Moreover, most SMEs lack dedicated marketing departments or specialists due to resource constraints (Bagwell, 2023). In many cases, business owners or managers in SMEs wear multiple hats, leading to a lack of focus on marketing activities. Without dedicated personnel to develop and implement marketing strategies, SMEs may struggle to allocate sufficient time and attention to building a customer-centric approach.

Furthermore, some SMEs lack a clear understanding of the concept of marketing orientation and its significance in contemporary times (Quaye & Mensah, 2019). Unlike larger firms that have the capacity to invest in training and development programmes, SMEs may not prioritize educating their workforce about marketing principles and practices. As a result, employees may not fully grasp the importance of customer orientation, market segmentation, and competitive positioning in driving business success. The adverse impact of this status quo is that without a customer-centric approach, SMEs risk offering products or services that do not resonate with target audiences, leading to low customer satisfaction and retention. Also, inadequate focus on marketing orientation by SMEs can result in missed growth opportunities for SMEs (Amin *et al*., 2016). By failing to anticipate and respond to changing market dynamics, SMEs may lose market share to more agile and customer-focused competitors. This can hinder their ability to expand into new markets, attract investment, or form strategic partnerships necessary for sustained growth. Against this backdrop, this study sought to establish the relationship between marketing orientation and development of SMEs in Calabar in order to reinforce the imperatives of the holistic integration of this orientation as a strategic step towards improved competitiveness. Specifically, the study sought to realize the following specific objectives:

i. To determine the effect of customer focus on the development of SMEs in Calabar;
ii. To assess the effect of product innovation on the development of SMEs in Calabar;
iii. To ascertain the effect of competitor analysis on the development of SMEs

in Calabar;

iv. To examine the effect of integrated marketing communication on the development of SMEs in Calabar.

Literature Review

Marketing orientation

Marketing orientation is a business philosophy that prioritizes understanding and meeting the needs and wants of customers. This approach emphasizes market research, customer analysis, and product development tailored to consumer preferences (Riswanto *et al*., 2020). In essence, it places the customer at the center of all business activities. Firms adopting a marketing orientation strive to create superior value for customers, thereby gaining a competitive advantage and achieving long-term success. One key aspect of marketing orientation is the continuous gathering and analysis of market data (Udriyah *et al*., 2019). This involves researching consumer behaviour, preferences, and trends to identify opportunities and anticipate changes in the marketplace. By staying attuned to customer needs, companies can develop products and services that resonate with their target audience, leading to increased sales and customer loyalty. Moreover, marketing-oriented firms prioritize building strong customer relationships through effective communication and personalized interactions, fostering trust and loyalty over time (Nkosi *et al*., 2019).

Another defining feature of marketing orientation is its focus on delivering customer value (Puspaningrum, 2020). Rather than solely concentrating on producing goods or services, companies adopting this approach aim to provide solutions that address specific customer needs and deliver tangible benefits. This customer-centric mindset extends beyond the initial purchase to encompass the entire customer experience, including pre-sale interactions, post-sale support, and ongoing engagement efforts (Mamun *et al*., 2018). By consistently delivering value and exceeding customer expectations, businesses can differentiate themselves from competitors and cultivate a loyal customer base. In contemporary times, marketing orientation has become increasingly important for business organizations as the rise of digital technology and social media has empowered consumers with greater access to information and choices than ever before (Länsiluoto *et al*., 2019). As a result, customers are more discerning and demanding, expecting personalized experiences and meaningful interactions with brands. In this landscape, companies that prioritize understanding and responding to customer needs are better positioned to succeed (Aminu, 2018).

Development of SMEs

The development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) entails the process whereby these enterprises achieve business growth, and market expansion, which

leads to increased customer patronage, sales revenue, profitability and competitive advantage (Zafar & Mustafa, 2017). At the heart of this process lies a concerted effort to optimize internal capabilities and external opportunities to propel these enterprises towards heightened success. Moreover, the journey of SME development entails a relentless pursuit of innovation and adaptability (Widjaja & Wijaya, 2019). In today's dynamic business environment, agility is paramount for SMEs seeking to thrive amidst evolving consumer preferences, technological advancements, and industry disruptions. This necessitates a culture of innovation that encourages experimentation, risk-taking, and continuous improvement across all facets of the enterprise. Whether it is refining existing products, exploring new market segments, or leveraging emerging technologies, SMEs must remain vigilant in their quest to stay ahead of the curve (Tan & Lee, 2021). By embracing innovation as a cornerstone of their growth strategy, SMEs can effectively differentiate themselves from competitors and capitalize on emerging opportunities in their respective industries (Ahmad & Kamarudin, 2022).

Also, the development of SMEs is intricately linked to their ability to foster meaningful relationships with customers and stakeholders (Park & Kim, 2023). Beyond mere transactional interactions, successful SMEs prioritize the cultivation of long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships built on trust, reliability, and exceptional customer service. This entails investing in robust customer relationship management systems, soliciting feedback to drive product/service improvements, and going above and beyond to exceed customer expectations at every touchpoint. By nurturing a loyal customer base and fostering a positive reputation within their industry, SMEs can fortify their market position and lay the groundwork for sustained growth and profitability (Nguyen & Mai, 2018). In addition, the journey of SME development often involves strategic expansion into new markets and territories (Ongom & Nkote, 2021). Armed with a solid foundation and a proven track record of success, SMEs may seek to capitalize on untapped opportunities beyond their traditional geographic boundaries. This expansion may take various forms, including geographical expansion, diversification of product/service offerings, or strategic partnerships/acquisitions.

Customer focus and development of SMEs

Customer focus, as a marketing orientation dimension, refers to the strategic approach taken by businesses to prioritize and cater to the needs, preferences, and satisfaction of their customers (Chigbu & Onyinyechi, 2018). This orientation involves a deep understanding of customer demographics, behaviours, and desires, which enables businesses to tailor their products and marketing efforts accordingly. Essentially, it revolves around placing the customer at the center of all business decisions and activities, aiming to create superior value and build long-term relationships (Bwisa & Waititu, 2017). From another perspective, customer focus can also be defined as the organizational mindset that emphasizes continuous

engagement and interaction with customers throughout the entire customer journey (Akotey & Dodoo, 2019). This involves actively seeking feedback, listening to customer concerns, and responding promptly to their needs and preferences. Such an approach fosters a customer-centric culture within the organization, where every employee understands the importance of satisfying customers and works collaboratively towards that goal.

In contemporary times, customer focus plays a crucial role in enhancing the marketing performance of business organizations because by prioritizing customer needs and preferences, businesses can differentiate themselves from competitors in crowded markets (Kasunmu & Obadia, 2018). Understanding what customers truly value allows businesses to develop unique value propositions and tailor their offerings to meet specific customer demands, thereby increasing their attractiveness to target audiences. Also, customer focus fosters customer loyalty and advocacy, which are essential for sustainable business growth (Wang & Chen, 2019). This is because by consistently delivering superior customer experiences and demonstrating a genuine commitment to customer satisfaction, businesses can cultivate strong relationships with their customer base. This viewpoint is backed by the study of Nkosi *et al*. (2019), which revealed that customer focus had a significant positive impact on SME performance in South Africa. The viewpoint is also backed by the study of Mensah and Boateng (2021), which revealed that customer focus had a significant positive relationship with the performance of SMEs in Ghana. The viewpoint also corresponds to the study of Namugenyi and Ssebunya (2020), which revealed that customer focus had a significant positive influence on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. The viewpoint is also reinforced by the study of Nguyen and Tran (2017), which revealed that customer focus significantly improved the performance of SMEs in Vietnam. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_1: *Customer focus has a significant effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar*.

Product innovation and development of SMEs

Product innovation, as a marketing orientation dimension, can be defined as the strategic process through which a company introduces novel or significantly improved products or services to meet the changing demands and preferences of consumers (Chang & Lim, 2018). This encompasses the development and introduction of new features, functionalities, designs, or technologies that provide enhanced value to customers compared to existing offerings in the market. In essence, product innovation involves the continuous pursuit of differentiation and competitive advantage by creating unique, desirable, and market-leading products that address evolving customer needs and preferences. This orientation requires companies to invest in research and development, design capabilities, and market insights to identify emerging trends and opportunities for innovation (Dune &

Pineda, 2019). Another comprehensive definition of product innovation in the context of marketing orientation is the systematic approach to creating and delivering innovative solutions that address unmet customer needs or solve existing problems in new and better ways (Hasanuzzaman & Chakraborty, 2021). This definition emphasizes the customer-centric nature of product innovation, highlighting its role in understanding and fulfilling the evolving demands, desires, and pain points of target customers.

In contemporary times, product innovation plays a crucial role in driving the marketing performance of business organizations because it enables them to differentiate themselves in highly competitive markets (Ahmed & Akhtar, 2019). This is critical because in today's saturated markets, where consumers are inundated with choices, product innovation becomes a key driver of brand differentiation and customer loyalty. This viewpoint is backed by the study of Nkosi *et al*. (2019), which revealed that product innovation had a significant positive impact on SME performance in South Africa. The viewpoint is also backed by the study of Mensah and Boateng (2021), which revealed that product innovation had a significant positive relationship with the performance of SMEs in Ghana. This viewpoint is also reinforced by the study of Ouma and Ochieng (2018), which revealed that product innovation had a significant positive effect on the performance of SMEs in Kenya. In the study by Namugenyi and Ssebunya (2020), it was also found that product innovation had a significant positive influence on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. The viewpoint is also supported by the study of Prakash and Rajuc (2023), which revealed that product innovation had a significant positive impact on the business performance of micro, small and medium enterprises in Bangladesh. Similarly, the study by Adamu *et al*. (2020) supported this viewpoint by revealing that there is a significant positive relationship between product innovation and performance of small and medium enterprises in Nigeria. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_2: *Product innovation has a significant effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar.*

Competitor analysis and development of SMEs

Competitor analysis in the context of marketing orientation encompasses the systematic examination and evaluation of rival businesses operating within the same industry or sector (Hussain & El-Said, 2018). It involves gathering, analyzing, and interpreting information about competitors' strategies, strengths, weaknesses, and market positioning to gain insights into their current and potential actions. This process enables businesses to comprehend the competitive landscape they operate in, identify emerging threats and opportunities, and develop effective strategies to maintain or enhance their market position. Through competitor analysis, companies

aim to understand their rivals' product offerings, pricing strategies, distribution channels, marketing tactics, and overall performance metrics (Karaev & Karabulut, 2019). Another perspective on competitor analysis views it as a strategic management tool that focuses on understanding the competitive dynamics of the marketplace (Kiros & Mamo, 2020). In this context, competitor analysis involves not only assessing direct competitors but also considering indirect competitors, potential entrants, and substitute products or services. It aims to identify competitive forces that shape industry attractiveness and influence business strategy formulation.

Furthermore, Pansakorn and Khemthong (2021) maintained that competitor analysis plays a crucial role in enhancing the marketing performance of business organizations as it provides valuable insights for strategic decision-making. By understanding competitors' strengths and weaknesses, businesses can refine their own strategies to capitalize on market gaps or differentiate themselves effectively. This viewpoint is backed by the study of Mensah and Boateng (2021), which revealed that competitor analysis had a significant positive relationship with the performance of SMEs in Ghana. The viewpoint is also backed by the study of Ouma and Ochieng (2018), which revealed that competitor analysis had a significant positive effect on the performance of SMEs in Kenya. The viewpoint is also supported by the study of Namugenyi and Ssebunya (2020), which revealed that competitor analysis had a significant positive influence on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. Also, this viewpoint is backed by the study of Nguyen and Tran (2017), which revealed that competitor analysis significantly improved the performance of SMEs in Vietnam. In addition, the viewpoint finds support in the study of Prakash and Rajuc (2023), which revealed that competitor analysis had a significant positive impact on the business performance of micro, small and medium enterprises in Bangladesh. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_3: *Competitor analysis has a significant effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar.*

Integrated marketing communication and development of SMEs

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) is a strategic approach utilized by organizations to coordinate and align their marketing communication efforts across various channels and platforms, both online and offline, with the aim of delivering a unified and consistent message to their target audience (Chigbu & Onyinyechi, 2018). This approach involves integrating different communication tools and techniques such as advertising, public relations, direct marketing, sales promotion, digital marketing, and social media, among others, into a cohesive and synergistic campaign. Essentially, IMC seeks to break down the silos that traditionally existed between different departments and functions within an organization, fostering

collaboration and synergy among them to create a seamless and holistic brand experience for consumers (Yoon & Luong, 2021). Another perspective on IMC emphasizes its role in creating a unified brand identity and messaging strategy that resonates with the target audience across multiple touchpoints (Kasunmu & Obadia, 2018). In this view, IMC goes beyond mere coordination of communication channels and tactics; it involves crafting a compelling brand narrative and value proposition that remains consistent and coherent across various platforms and interactions. By ensuring that all marketing communications reinforce and complement each other, IMC helps to build brand equity, enhance brand recall, and foster stronger connections with customers (Akotey & Dodoo, 2019).

This integrated approach enables organizations to present a cohesive brand image and communicate their value proposition effectively, thereby increasing the likelihood of engagement and conversion among consumers (Dune & Pineda, 2019). Importantly, in contemporary times, where consumers are inundated with an abundance of information and have access to numerous communication channels, IMC plays a crucial role in cutting through the clutter and capturing consumers' attention (Gupta & Singh, 2018). By leveraging the synergy between different communication channels and platforms, organizations can amplify the impact of their marketing efforts and reach their target audience more effectively. This viewpoint is backed by the study of Nkosi *et al*. (2019), which revealed that integrated marketing communication had a significant positive impact on SME performance in South Africa. This viewpoint is also backed by the study of Ouma and Ochieng (2018), which revealed that integrated marketing communication had a significant positive effect on the performance of SMEs in Kenya. The viewpoint is also reinforced by the study of Namugenyi and Ssebunya (2020), which revealed that integrated marketing communication had a significant positive influence on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. In another study by Nguyen and Tran (2017), it was found that integrated marketing communication significantly improved the performance of SMEs in Vietnam. Similarly, the findings of the study by Prakash and Rajuc (2023) revealed that integrated marketing communication had a significant positive impact on the business performance of micro, small and medium enterprises in Bangladesh. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_4: *Integrated marketing communication has a significant effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar.*

Review of empirical studies and conceptual model

Nkosi *et al*. (2019) conducted a study to determine the impact of marketing orientation on SME performance in South Africa. The study sought to explain the impacts of product innovation, customer focus, integrated marketing communication and market research on SME performance in South Africa. The study obtained primary data from 296 operators of SMEs in Pretoria using a structured

questionnaire. The data were descriptively analyzed and hypotheses tested using multiple regression analysis. The findings of the study revealed that product innovation, customer focus, integrated marketing communication and market research had significant positive impacts on SME performance in South Africa. However, the limitation of this study is that it was constrained overwhelmingly to SMEs in South Africa, with no reference to the influence of marketing orientation dimensions on the development of SMEs in Nigeria.

Mensah and Boateng (2021) examined marketing orientation and SME performance in Ghana. The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between marketing orientation variables (customer focus, competitor analysis, product innovation, continuous improvement) and the performance of SMEs in Ghana. To that end, the study sought and obtained primary data from 283 enterprises in the SMEs category in Kumasi using a structured questionnaire. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the hypotheses of the study were tested using structural equation modeling. The findings of the study revealed that customer focus, competitor analysis, product innovation, and continuous improvement had significant positive relationships with the performance of SMEs in Ghana. However, the limitation of this study is that it was constrained overwhelmingly to SMEs in Ghana, with no reference to the influence of marketing orientation dimensions on the development of SMEs in Nigeria.

Ouma and Ochieng (2018) investigated the role of marketing orientation in enhancing the performance of SMEs in Kenya. The aim of this study was to examine the effects of competitor analysis, market research, integrated marketing communication, and product innovation on the performance of SMEs in Kenya. The study used a structured questionnaire survey to obtain primary data from 185 operators of SMEs in Nairobi, Kenya. The data were subjected to statistical analysis using descriptive statistics while the hypotheses of the study were tested using regression and correlation analysis. Consequently, the findings of the study revealed that competitor analysis, market research, integrated marketing communication, and product innovation had significant positive effects on the performance of SMEs in Kenya. However, the limitation of this study is that it is restricted to the performance of SMEs in Kenya, with no reference to the causality between marketing orientation and SMEs performance in Nigeria.

Namugenyi and Ssebunya (2020) carried out their own study on marketing orientation and SME performance in Uganda. The specific aim of the study was to determine the influences of integrated marketing communication, competitor analysis, customer focus and product innovation on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. The study relied on a structured questionnaire to obtain primary data from 172 operators of SMEs in Kampala. The data obtained were analyzed and interpreted using descriptive statistics and the hypotheses of the study were tested

using multiple regression analysis. The findings thereof revealed that integrated marketing communication, competitor analysis, customer focus and product innovation had significant positive influences on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. However, the limitation of this study is that it is restricted to the performance of SMEs in Uganda, with no reference to the causality between marketing orientation and SMEs performance in Nigeria.

Nguyen and Tran (2017) investigated marketing orientation and SME performance in Vietnam. The study had the objective of determining the roles of competitor analysis, integrated marketing communication, customer focus and relationship marketing in enhancing the performance of SMEs in Vietnam. Using a structured questionnaire survey, the study obtained primary data from 86 owners of SMEs in Ho Chimin City. The data were analyzed and interpreted using frequencies, percentages and mean, while the hypotheses of the study were tested using structural equation modeling. The findings of the study revealed that competitor analysis, integrated marketing communication, customer focus and relationship marketing significantly improved the performance of SMEs in Vietnam. However, the limitation of this study is that it was constrained overwhelmingly to the performance of SMEs in Vietnam, with no reference to the influence of marketing orientation dimensions on the development of SMEs in Nigeria.

In their own study, Prakash and Rajuc (2023) investigated the impact of marketing orientation on the business performance of micro, small and medium enterprises in Bangladesh. The study aimed to unravel the impacts of product innovation, market segmentation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication on the business performance of micro, small and medium enterprises in Bangladesh. The study relied on a structured questionnaire survey to obtain primary data from 152 operators of SMEs in Dhaka. The data obtained underwent statistical analysis and interpretation with the aid of descriptive statistics, and the hypotheses of the study were tested using correlation and regression analysis. The findings of the study revealed that product innovation, market segmentation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication had significant positive impacts on the business performance of micro, small and medium enterprises in Bangladesh. However, the limitation of this study is that it is restricted to the performance of SMEs in Bangladesh, with no reference to the causality between marketing orientation and SMEs performance in Nigeria.

In another study, Nwankwo and Kanyangale (2019) investigated market orientation and survival of small and medium enterprises in Nigeria. The aim of the study was to determine the effects of customer intensity and value creation on the survival of

manufacturing SMEs in Nigeria. To that end, the study obtained primary data from 387 owner-managers of manufacturing SMEs using a structured questionnaire. The findings emerging from the study revealed that customer intensity and value creation significantly and positively contributed to the survival of manufacturing SMEs in Nigeria. However, the limitation of the study is that it was restricted to only two dimensions of marketing orientation, hence, it fails to account for the contributions of other dimensions such as customer focus, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication to the performance of SMEs in Nigeria.

Also, Oluwatoyin *et al*. (2018) conducted a study on the impact of market orientation on performance of selected hotels in Ondo State, Nigeria. The study sought to determine the effects of customer retention, and customer friendliness practices on the performance of selected hotels in Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria. To that end, the study obtained primary data from managers of 68 hotels in Akure, Ondo State using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were useful in data analysis and interpretation, while hypotheses testing was done using correlation analysis. The findings of the study revealed that customer retention, and customer friendliness practices had significant impacts on the performance of selected hotels in Akure, Ondo State. However, the limitation of this study is that it only centered on two dimensions of marketing orientation, and hence does not account for the contributions of product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication to the performance of Nigerian SMEs.

Similarly, Adamu *et al*. (2020) examined the effect of marketing innovation on performance of small and medium enterprises in Nigeria. The study sought to determine the relationship between marketing innovation dimensions (product innovation, pricing innovation, promotion innovation, distribution innovation) and performance of small and medium enterprises in Nigeria. Primary data were obtained from 203 operators of wood and furniture SMEs in Yobe State, Nigeria using a structured questionnaire. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics while the hypotheses of the study were tested using Pearson's product moment correlation. The findings of the study therefore revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between marketing innovation dimensions (product innovation, pricing innovation, promotion innovation, distribution innovation) and performance of small and medium enterprises in Nigeria. However, the limitation of this study is that it only centered on one dimension of marketing orientation (product innovation); hence, it is incapable of explaining the roles of customer focus, competitor analysis

and integrated marketing communication in enhancing the performance of SMEs in Nigeria.

From the scholarly articles included in this review, it has been observed that several dimensions of marketing orientation have been studied in terms of their relationship with the performance of business organizations such as SMEs. In the context of this study, marketing orientation is perceived using four dimensions rooted in empirical literature (customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication). The parameters measuring these variables as seen in FIG. 1 were adapted from: Nkosi *et al*. (2019); Mensah and Boateng (2021); Ouma and Ochieng (2018). Similarly, in line with the findings of these relevant studies, the present study hypothesizes that these dimensions of marketing orientation have some sort of relationship with the performance of SMEs in Calabar, Nigeria. The proposed relationship between these marketing orientation dimensions and SMEs performance in Calabar is depicted in FIG. 1.

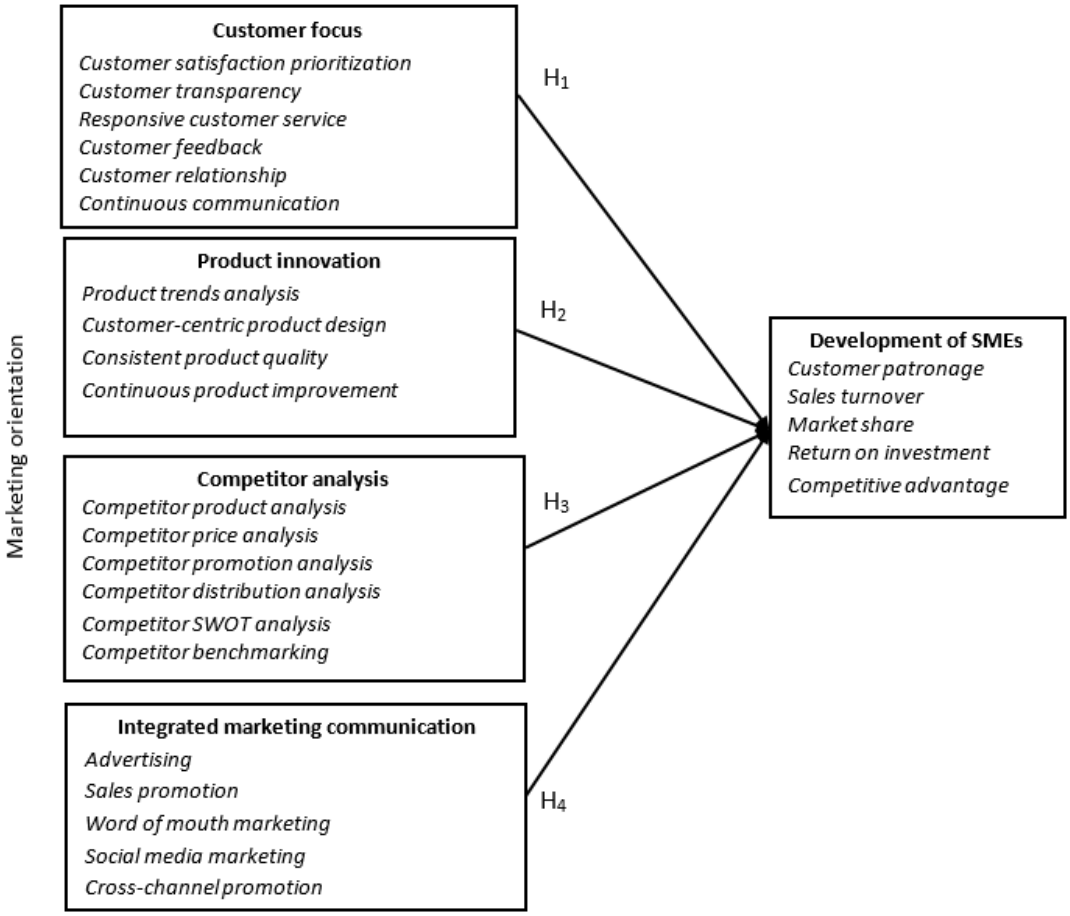


FIG. 1: *Adapted conceptual model of the study*

Source: *Parameters of independent variable adapted from Nkosi et al. (2019); Mensah and Boateng (2021); Ouma and Ochieng (2018). Dependent variable parameters adapted from Amin (2021); Okoli et al. (2021)*

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the dynamic capabilities theory, propounded by Teece *et al*. (1997), which explains how business organizations can adapt, upgrade and renew their internal resources and capabilities to keep pace with changes in the external business environment. The theory posits that sustained competitive advantage comes from an organization's capacity to dynamically integrate, build, and reconfigure its resources, rather than merely possessing static ones (Teece *et al*., 1997). It extends the resource-based view (RBV) by emphasizing the importance of a firm's proactive adaptability to rapidly evolving business environments (Ringov, 2017). The theory's core processes are sensing, seizing, and transforming (Teece *et al*., 1997). Sensing is the ability to identify changes and opportunities in the external environment.

Seizing involves the swift and effective deployment of resources to exploit these opportunities. Transforming refers to the capacity to reconfigure the resource base to meet new challenges and maintain competitive advantage over time. Teece *et al*. (1997) argue that these dynamic capabilities are essential for firms to navigate dynamic environments and form the foundation for strategic management by allowing organizations to anticipate and respond to market and industry changes.

In the context of this study, the dynamic capabilities theory emerges as a significant framework for understanding the relationship between marketing orientation and the development of SMEs in Nigeria. From its major premise, the theory suggests that SMEs can harness marketing orientation practices as a core component of their dynamic capabilities. These capabilities may enable SMEs to adapt to changing market conditions and environmental dynamics effectively. The premise of the theory further implies that by integrating marketing orientation into their operations, SMEs can not only respond to market shifts but also proactively shape their strategies to meet evolving customer needs and preferences. Furthermore, within the Nigerian business landscape, characterized by rapid changes and uncertainties, the theory suggests that the application of dynamic capabilities becomes even more pertinent for SMEs. This is because by leveraging marketing orientation as a dynamic capability, SMEs can stay attuned to market trends, consumer behaviours, and competitive pressures, allowing them to seize emerging opportunities and mitigate potential threats effectively.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted cross-sectional survey research design, which enabled the collection of primary data from a cross-section of SMEs operators on a one-time basis, within a short period of time. This research design was suitable for the study because it allowed the researcher to capture a snapshot of the population's characteristics, attitudes, and behaviours at a specific moment, facilitating the examination of the relationship between the study's variables. Similarly, the design's ability to efficiently gather data from a diverse sample allowed for the generalization of findings to the broader population, enhancing the external validity of the study.

Population and sample size

The target population of this study comprised operators of all SMEs operating in Calabar, Cross River State. However, the exact numerical size of the population is unknown because most SMEs operating in Calabar are unregistered with the government, hence there is insufficient accurate data on the population. Against

this backdrop, this study relied on an estimated population of 5000 operators of SMEs in Calabar. This population is appropriate because the actual numerical size of the population is unknown and the estimated population is large enough (above 1000) to closely depict the properties of the actual population (Acharyya & Bhattacharya, 2019). The study applied the Taro Yamane formula to statistically determine the sample size for the study. The Taro Yamane formula is stated thus:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n	=	Sample size required
N	=	Finite population
I	=	Constant
e	=	Margin of error (usually 5 percent)

By simple substitution,

$$n = \frac{5000}{1+5000(0.05)^2}$$

$$= \frac{5000}{1+5000(0.0025)}$$

$$= \frac{5000}{1+12.5}$$

$$= \frac{5000}{13.5}$$

$= 370.37 \quad \therefore n = 370$ operators of SMEs approximately

Subsequently, the sampling technique adopted therefore was disproportionate stratified sampling, which enabled the researcher to target operators of SMEs in both of Calabar South and Municipality local government areas. In dealing with a heterogeneous population like operators of SMEs, who vary from enterprise to enterprise, it was beneficial to use disproportionate stratification to ensure that each subgroup was adequately represented in the sample (Dźwigoł & Dźwigoł-Barosz, 2018). In applying this technique, the researchers split the local government areas into distinct strata made up of commercial streets where SMEs activity is substantial as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Stratified sampling technique

Calabar South Strata		**Calabar Municipal Strata**	
Watt Market	100 operators	Marian Market	100 operators
Goldie Road	50 operators	Etta-Agbor Road	50 operators
Mount Zion Road	20 operators	Marian Road	50 operators

The researchers visited these selected strata along with a team of enumerators and disproportionately included operators of the SMEs found in these locations to participate in the study. This is because the exact population of operators of SMEs in these strata was not known, hence the researcher could not proportionately administer the questionnaire according to the population size. However, only those confirmed to be actual operators, through prior inquiry, were included in the study and also, only those who provided express consent to participate in the study were ultimately included. In this way, stratified sampling ensured that all potential elements of the sample in all strata groups were given the opportunity of being selected as sampling, thereby enhancing the objectivity of the sampling procedure.

Source and Methods of Data Collection

To obtain primary data for the study, the researcher used a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from existing studies. The instrument comprised two sections; namely: Section A (which collected data on respondents' demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, and educational qualifications) and Section B, which contained statements adapted from existing studies to measure the variables of the study: customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis, integrated marketing communication and development of SMEs. The parameters for measuring these variables as well as their empirical sources are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Variables, parameters and empirical sources

SN	Variables	Parameters	Empirical sources
1	Customer focus	Customer satisfaction prioritization Customer transparency Responsive customer service Customer feedback Customer relationship Continuous communication	Nkosi *et al*. (2019); Mensah and Boateng (2021)
2	Product innovation	Product trends analysis Customer-centric product design Consistent product quality Continuous product improvement	Nkosi *et al*. (2019); Mensah and Boateng (2021)
3	Competitor analysis	Competitor product analysis Competitor price analysis Competitor promotion analysis Competitor distribution analysis Competitor SWOT analysis Competitor benchmarking	Mensah and Boateng (2021); Ouma and Ochieng (2018)
4	IMC	Advertising Sales promotion Word of mouth marketing Social media marketing Cross-channel promotion	Nkosi *et al*. (2019)
5	Development of SMEs	Customer patronage Sales turnover Market share Return on investment Competitive advantage	Amin (2021); Okoli *et al.* (2021)

Source: Researchers' construction via literature review

Questionnaire reliability and data analytical method

The reliability status of the research questionnaire was confirmed through the Cronbach alpha reliability method. Draft copies of the questionnaire were administered to a random selection of 30 operators of SMEs selected from a single location in Calabar South. These respondents were deliberately excluded from the actual survey to guard against respondent biases in the actual survey. The data obtained during the survey were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 26) for reliability testing. The instrument was subsequently deemed reliable and adopted for field administration because all its measurement scales produced Cronbach alpha coefficients not less than the benchmark of 0.7 (see Table 3).

Table 3: Questionnaire reliability statistics

SN	Variables	No. of items	Alpha coefficients
1	Customer focus	6	.792
2	Product innovation	4	.799
3	Competitor analysis	6	.811
4	IMC	5	.726
5	Development of SMEs	5	.764
		26	

Source: Researchers' analysis via SPSS-26 (2024)

After statistically validating the reliability of the questionnaire, it was utilized for field administration, resulting in the collection of primary data for the research. This data was then analyzed using descriptive statistics. Additionally, the study's hypotheses were tested through a multiple linear regression model, as outlined below:

$$DEVSMEs = a + \beta_1 CUSFOC + \beta_2 PRODINO + \beta_3 COMPANLYS + \beta_4 IMC + e$$

Where:

DEVSMEs	=	Development of SMEs
a	=	The intercept (or constant)
β_1CUSFOC	=	Coefficient of customer focus
β_2PRODINO	=	Coefficient of product innovation
β_3COMPANLYS	=	Coefficient of competitor analysis
β_4IMC	=	Coefficient of integrated marketing communication
e	=	Error margin (5 percent)

Analysis and Discussion

Data Analysis and Interpretation

During the questionnaire survey, a total of 370 copies of the questionnaire were administered to operators of SMEs in Calabar, Cross River State. Out of the 370 questionnaire copies distributed, 318 or 86.0 percent of the questionnaire were retrieved and usable for the analysis, while 52 or 14.0 percent of the questionnaire could not be retrieved. This reveals that the majority of the

questionnaire administered to respondents were successfully retrieved due to the meticulous and rigorous guidance and follow-up efforts of the research assistants recruited for the questionnaire survey. With this data, the null hypotheses developed for the study were tested thus:

Hypothesis one

Ho: Customer focus has no significant effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar.

Hypothesis two

Ho: Product innovation has no significant effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar.

Hypothesis three

Ho: Competitor analysis has no significant effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar.

Hypothesis four

Ho: Integrated marketing communication has no significant effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar.

Decision criteria: If the probability (P) is less than 0.05, we accept the alternative hypothesis; otherwise, we reject the null hypothesis.

Table 4: Model summary of the effect of marketing orientation on the development of small and medium enterprises in Cross River State

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.704[a]	.596	.591	.69865

a. Predictors: (Constant), Customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication

Source: Researchers' Computation using SPSS-26 (2024)

Table 5: ANOVA[a] of the effect of marketing orientation on the development of small and medium enterprises in Cross River State

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	150.996	4	37.749	77.039	.000[b]
	Residual	153.266	313	.490		
	Total	304.262	317			

a. Dependent Variable: Development of SMEs

b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication

Source: *Researcher's Computation using SPSS-26 (2024*)

Table 6: Coefficients[a] of the effect of marketing orientation on the development of small and medium enterprises in Cross River State

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.157	.216		5.367	.000
	Customer focus	.135	.084	.386	3.101	.002
	Product innovation	.289	.198	.494	2.929	.004
	Competitor analysis	.233	.055	.326	4.204	.000
	Integrated marketing communication	.635	.041	.312	5.011	.001

a. Dependent Variable: Development of SMEs

Source: Researcher's Computation using SPSS-26 (2024)

Tables 4, 5 and 6 illustrate the effect of marketing orientation on the development of small and medium enterprises in Cross River State. The correlation coefficient (R = 0.704) in Table 4 indicates a strong relationship (70.4 percent) between marketing orientation and development of SMEs in Cross River State. Moreover, the coefficient of determination (R2 = 0.596) suggests that marketing orientation can explain 59.6 percent of the variance in the development of SMEs in Cross River State. Also, the statistical analysis in Table 5 (F = 77.039, p = 0.000) confirms the significant effect of marketing orientation on the development of SMEs in Cross River State.

Similarly, Table 6 highlights the contributions of all the marketing orientation dimensions tested to the dependent variable (development of SMEs). In this scenario, product innovation made the highest contribution (beta = 0.494 or 49.4 percent), followed by customer focus (beta = 0.386 or 38.6 percent). Whereas, integrated marketing communication had the least contribution to the dependent variable (beta = 0.312 or 31.2 percent). Furthermore, the results in Table 6 show that all the dimensions of marketing orientation tested had statistically significant and positive effects on the development of SMEs in Cross River State, as indicated by their respective p-values and positive t-test values (customer focus: p = 0.002, t = 3. 101; product innovation: p = 0.004, t = 2.929; competitor analysis: p = 0.000, t = 4.204; and integrated marketing communication: p = 0.001, t = 5.011). Hence, given that the p-values of all the dimensions tested were less than the error margin of 0.05, all null hypotheses are rejected in favour of the corresponding alternative hypotheses. Thus, the findings of the study revealed that customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication had significant positive effects on the development of SMEs in Cross River State.

Discussion of Findings

Customer focus and development of SMES

From the test of hypothesis one, it was revealed that customer focus has a significant positive effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar. This finding is backed by the study of Nkosi *et al*. (2019), which revealed that customer focus had a significant positive impact on SME performance in South Africa. The finding is also backed by the study of Mensah and Boateng (2021), which revealed that customer focus had a significant positive relationship with the performance of SMEs in Ghana. The finding also corresponds to the study of Namugenyi and Ssebunya (2020), which revealed that customer focus had a significant positive influence on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. The finding is also reinforced by the study of Nguyen and Tran (2017), which revealed that customer focus significantly improved the performance of SMEs in Vietnam. This finding underscores the critical importance for operators of SMEs in Cross River State to prioritize customer focus as a strategic initiative. The significant positive effect identified implies that SMEs that actively align their business strategies with customer needs and preferences are more likely to experience enhanced growth and development. Therefore, investing in customer-centric approaches such as improving service delivery, understanding customer expectations, and fostering strong customer relationships can potentially yield substantial benefits in terms of business success and sustainability for SMEs in the region.

Product innovation and development of SMES

The test of hypothesis two revealed that product innovation has a significant positive effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar. This finding is backed by the study of Nkosi *et al*. (2019), which revealed that product innovation had a significant positive impact on SME performance in South Africa. The finding is also backed by the study of Mensah and Boateng (2021), which revealed that product innovation had a significant positive relationship with the performance of SMEs in Ghana. Again, the finding is reinforced by the study of Ouma and Ochieng (2018), which revealed that product innovation had a significant positive effect on the performance of SMEs in Kenya. This research finding underscores the critical importance for operators of SMEs in Cross River State to prioritize and invest in product innovation. It indicates that actively engaging in developing and introducing new or improved products can significantly enhance the growth and sustainability of SMEs in the region. By focusing on innovation, the finding suggests that SME operators can potentially differentiate their offerings, attract more customers, improve competitiveness, and ultimately foster long-term business development and success in Cross River State.

Competitor analysis and development of SMES

In testing hypothesis three, it was revealed that competitor analysis has a significant positive effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar. This finding is backed by

the study of Mensah and Boateng (2021), which revealed that competitor analysis had a significant positive relationship with the performance of SMEs in Ghana. The finding is also backed by the study of Ouma and Ochieng (2018), which revealed that competitor analysis had a significant positive effect on the performance of SMEs in Kenya. Again, the finding is supported by the study of Namugenyi and Ssebunya (2020), which revealed that competitor analysis had a significant positive influence on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. Also, this finding is backed by the study of Nguyen and Tran (2017), which revealed that competitor analysis significantly improved the performance of SMEs in Vietnam. This research finding underscores the critical importance for operators of SMEs in Cross River State to prioritize and invest in competitor analysis. By understanding their competitors' strategies, strengths, and weaknesses, SMEs can strategically position themselves in the market, identify opportunities for growth and innovation, and effectively differentiate their offerings. This proactive approach not only enhances their competitiveness but also contributes significantly to their overall development and sustainability in a dynamic business environment.

Integrated marketing communication and development of SMES

In testing hypothesis four, the findings revealed that integrated marketing communication has a significant positive effect on the development of SMEs in Calabar. This finding is backed by the study of Nkosi *et al*. (2019), which revealed that integrated marketing communication had a significant positive impact on SME performance in South Africa. This finding is also backed by the study of Ouma and Ochieng (2018), which revealed that integrated marketing communication had a significant positive effect on the performance of SMEs in Kenya. Similarly, the finding is reinforced by the study of Namugenyi and Ssebunya (2020), which revealed that integrated marketing communication had a significant positive influence on the marketing performance of SMEs in Uganda. In another study by Nguyen and Tran (2017), it was found that integrated marketing communication significantly improved the performance of SMEs in Vietnam. This research finding underscores the critical importance for operators of SMEs in Cross River State to adopt and implement integrated marketing communication strategies effectively. By doing so, SMEs can harness the significant positive impact that integrated marketing communication can have on their development. This approach emphasizes the need for cohesive and synchronized marketing efforts across various channels to enhance visibility, brand reputation, customer engagement, and ultimately, business growth within the region.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In contemporary times, the marketing orientation has been projected as a potent framework capable of enabling business organizations navigate the complexities of business and enhance competitive advantage. Scholars have argued that a strong marketing orientation not only facilitates customer-centric strategies but also fosters

organizational adaptability, innovation, and long-term profitability in dynamic market environments. This study was therefore carried out to investigate the role of marketing orientation in the development of SMEs in Cross River State. The study specifically sought to unravel the effects of customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication on the development of SMEs in Calabar. This necessitated the statistical analysis of primary data obtained from operators of SMEs in Calabar. The result of this analysis demonstrated that marketing orientation dimensions (customer focus, product innovation, competitor analysis and integrated marketing communication) had significant positive effects on the development of SMEs in Cross River State. As such, the study concludes that a strong commitment of the implementation of marketing orientation by SMEs can enhance competitive advantage and long-term performance of SMEs in Nigeria. To that end, the following recommendations are suggested for implementation by SMEs:

i. Operators of SMEs in Nigeria need to commit to the principle and practice of customer sovereignty in their operations by ensuring that goods and services they offer are tailored to satisfactorily meet customers' needs on a consistent basis while maintaining a viable relationship with customers for the long term.
ii. SMEs should commit to continuous product innovation by conducting trend analysis in order to provide products that align with customers' requirements and offer the most benefits to customers, thereby encouraging customer satisfaction and loyalty. By ensuring customer satisfaction through continuous product innovation, SMEs can actualize sustainable competitive advantage through steady customer patronage and sales revenue.
iii. It is imperative for operators of SMEs to harness the potential of periodic competitor analysis to design and implement marketing campaigns to counter competitors' actions, attract customers' patronage and capture substantial market share. This will ensure that SMEs have the substantial customer base to operate profitably in the market especially amidst competitive pressures.
iv. Operators of SMEs in Nigeria can maximize integrated marketing communication by strategically aligning their advertising, public relations, digital marketing, and sales promotions efforts to create consistent, cohesive messaging across all channels, thereby increasing brand visibility, customer engagement, and ultimately enhancing their competitive performance in the market. This consistency and exposure to the target market will ensure that SMEs are also well-positioned to attract customers' attention and patronage.

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