Digital Marketing Adoption and Growth of Women-Led SMEs in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of digital marketing adoption on the performance of women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria, with customer growth modelled as a mediating mechanism. Anchored on the Technology Acceptance Model and the Resource-Based View, the study conceptualizes digital marketing adoption as both a technology-driven behavioural outcome and a strategic capability that can enhance firm-level competitiveness. The target population comprised owner-managers of women-led SMEs operating across five Nigerian states. Using Cochran's sample size determination approach, 312 respondents were surveyed through a structured questionnaire administered electronically via Google Forms. After data screening, 296 valid responses were retained for analysis. A multistage sampling approach combining purposive and snowball techniques was employed to access eligible participants. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that digital marketing adoption has a positive and statistically significant effect on sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability. Customer growth partially mediates the relationship between digital marketing adoption and sales growth, suggesting that digital capabilities translate into financial outcomes through market expansion mechanisms. The structural model demonstrates substantial explanatory power for sales growth, reinforcing the strategic value of digital marketing among women-led SMEs. By modelling customer growth as an intervening pathway, this study advances digital entrepreneurship scholarship in emerging economies and provides evidence-based insights for policymakers and SME development agencies seeking to enhance women's enterprise competitiveness through digital transformation.

Keywords: *Digital marketing adoption; Customer growth; Sales growth; Business sustainability*

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Background to the Study

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute the backbone of most emerging economies and are widely recognized as engines of employment generation, innovation, and poverty alleviation. In Nigeria, SMEs account for a substantial proportion of business establishments and contribute significantly to national output and job creation (SMEDAN & NBS, 2017). Beyond their aggregate economic contribution, SMEs play a crucial developmental role by promoting entrepreneurial inclusion and decentralized economic participation. Within this sector, women-led enterprises represent an increasingly important segment, contributing not only to economic growth but also to social transformation, household welfare improvement, and gender empowerment (Brush et al., 2009; Fatoki, 2014).

Despite their developmental relevance, women-owned SMEs often operate under structural and institutional constraints that limit scalability and competitiveness. Prior studies highlight persistent barriers including limited access to finance, restricted professional networks, constrained market access, and socio-cultural limitations (Hisrich & Brush, 1984; Olawale & Garwe, 2010). These constraints are particularly salient in emerging markets, where institutional support systems are still evolving. As markets become increasingly digitized, the ability of women entrepreneurs to leverage digital technologies may determine whether such enterprises remain marginal or achieve sustainable growth.

Digital marketing adoption has emerged as a strategic capability capable of transforming how firms interact with customers, position their brands, and compete in dynamic environments. Digital marketing encompasses online platforms and tools such as social media engagement, search engine optimization, digital advertising, and content-based promotion, which collectively enhance customer reach and engagement (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model, adoption of digital marketing tools depends on perceived usefulness and ease of use, while the Resource-Based View conceptualizes digital capabilities as strategic resources that generate competitive advantage when effectively deployed.

Nigeria's rapidly expanding internet penetration and mobile connectivity have created new opportunities for SMEs to engage customers beyond traditional physical markets. However, digital transformation within the SME sector remains uneven. Women-led enterprises in particular face skill gaps, infrastructural deficiencies, and uncertainty regarding the return on digital investment (Adewale & Osabuohien, 2020; Eze & Chinedu-Eze, 2015). While digital platforms theoretically lower entry barriers, empirical evidence on whether digital marketing adoption translates into measurable firm growth outcomes among women-led SMEs in Nigeria remains limited.

Importantly, firm growth is multidimensional and extends beyond short-term revenue gains. Sustainable business performance may manifest in increased sales, expansion of customer base, and enhanced long-term viability. Understanding whether digital marketing adoption influences these dimensions directly or indirectly through mechanisms, such as customer growth, is essential for advancing theory and informing policy. Against this backdrop, this

study investigates the effect of digital marketing adoption on sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability among women-led SMEs in Nigeria, drawing evidence from a multistate survey of women-led small and medium sized enterprises.

Research Problem and Justification

Although the digitalization of SMEs has received increasing scholarly attention, significant conceptual and empirical gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature examines digital technology adoption in SMEs broadly, without isolating gendered entrepreneurial contexts. Women entrepreneurs operate within distinct institutional and socio-cultural environments that may influence both technology adoption decisions and performance outcomes (Fatoki & Chinomona, 2019). Consequently, general SME findings cannot be assumed to apply uniformly to women-led enterprises.

Second, prior studies frequently treat digital marketing adoption as an isolated predictor of performance without unpacking the mechanisms through which such adoption translates into growth. Theoretically, digital marketing may enhance performance by expanding customer reach, strengthening customer engagement, and improving retention. However, few empirical studies within the Nigerian context explicitly model customer growth as a mediating mechanism linking digital marketing to sales and sustainability outcomes. This omission limits understanding of how digital capabilities are converted into tangible business-level benefits.

Third, existing empirical evidence in Nigeria remains fragmented and often geographically limited. Given the regional heterogeneity in SME concentration and entrepreneurial ecosystems across Nigerian states, broader multistate evidence is required to enhance external validity and generalizability. Without such evidence, policy interventions aimed at promoting digital entrepreneurship among women may lack contextual precision.

The justification for this study is therefore threefold. Theoretically, it integrates the Technology Acceptance Model and the Resource-Based View to explain not only why women-led SMEs adopt digital marketing tools, but also how such adoption translates into multidimensional growth outcomes. Empirically, it provides multistate quantitative evidence on the performance implications of digital marketing adoption among women entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Practically, it offers policy-relevant insights for government agencies, SME development institutions, and women entrepreneur associations seeking to design targeted digital capacity-building interventions. By examining digital marketing adoption alongside customer growth, sales growth, and business sustainability, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital transformation within gendered entrepreneurial ecosystems in emerging economies.

Research Objectives
The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of digital marketing adoption on the growth of women-led SMEs in Nigeria. However, the specific objectives are to:
1. Assess the effect of digital marketing adoption on sales growth of women-led SMEs in

Nigeria;

2. Examine the effect of digital marketing adoption on customer growth of women-led SMEs in Nigeria;
3. Evaluate the effect of digital marketing adoption on business sustainability of women-led SMEs in Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are formulated for this study:

$H_0 1$: Digital marketing adoption has no significant effect on the sales growth of women-led SMEs in Nigeria.

$H_0 2$: Digital marketing adoption has no significant effect on the customer growth of women-led SMEs in Nigeria.

$H_0 3$: Digital marketing adoption has no significant effect on the business sustainability of women-led SMEs in Nigeria.

Review of Related Literature

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between digital marketing adoption and the growth of women-led SMEs in Nigeria, with growth operationalized using sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability.
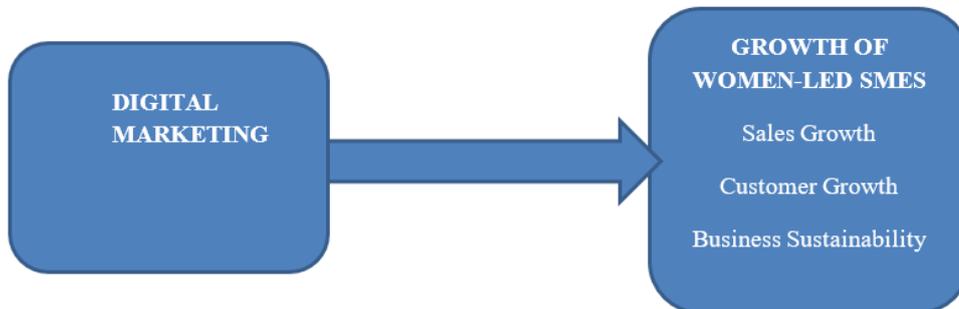

Fig 1: Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study, showing digital marketing adoption as the independent variable and growth of women-led SMEs measured by sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability as the dependent variables. The model assumes a direct causal relationship between the independent variable and each of the dependent variables, which will be empirically tested using appropriate statistical techniques.

Conceptual Review

Digital Marketing Adoption

Digital marketing adoption refers to the extent to which firms integrate digital technologies and online platforms into their marketing activities to promote products, engage customers, and create value. According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019), digital marketing involves the use of digital media, data, and technology to achieve marketing objectives through

targeted and interactive communication. For SMEs, digital marketing adoption represents not merely the use of online tools but a strategic orientation toward leveraging digital channels such as social media, search engines, and email marketing to enhance competitiveness (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014).

In the context of women-led SMEs, digital marketing adoption serves as a critical enabler for overcoming traditional barriers related to limited market access and resource constraints. Studies suggest that adopting digital marketing allows small businesses to operate beyond geographical boundaries, improve customer interaction, and compete with larger firms at relatively lower costs (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Thus, digital marketing adoption in this study reflects the degree to which women entrepreneurs utilize digital platforms to support business growth and sustainability.

Sales Growth

Sales growth is a key indicator of firm performance and reflects an increase in revenue or sales volume over a given period. Wiklund and Shepherd (2005) describe sales growth as one of the most reliable measures of SME growth because it captures market acceptance and financial progress of a business. Unlike absolute profit figures, sales growth provides insight into expansion trajectory of a business and its ability to scale operations. From a digital marketing perspective, sales growth is often linked to improved visibility, targeted promotions, and enhanced customer reach facilitated by online platforms (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). Increased sales growth could signal the effectiveness of digital marketing efforts in converting online engagement into tangible financial outcomes. For the purpose of this study, sales growth represents the financial performance outcome attributable to the adoption of digital marketing strategies.

Customer Growth

Customer growth refers to the expansion of a firm's customer base through the acquisition of new customers and retention of existing ones. Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasize that customer growth is fundamental to long-term business success, as it reflects market penetration, brand recognition, and customer relationship effectiveness. In SMEs, customer growth often precedes and drives other performance outcomes such as sales and profitability.

Digital marketing plays a significant role in facilitating customer growth by enabling interactive communication, personalized messaging, and continuous engagement (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). In this context, customer growth reflects the ability to leverage digital platforms to attract diverse market segments, build trust and loyalty.

Business Sustainability

Business sustainability, in the context of SMEs, refers to the ability of a business to maintain continuous operations, adapt to environmental changes, and remain competitive over a long period. This construct focuses on business survival, resilience, and continuity. Bansal and DesJardine (2014) argue that sustainability in business performance involves balancing short-term outcomes with long-term viability. From the Resource-Based View (RBV), sustainability

is achieved when firms develop strategic capabilities that are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). Digital marketing adoption constitutes such a capability, as it enhances brand equity, customer relationships, and adaptive capacity. For women-led SMEs operating in volatile environments like Nigeria, business sustainability reflects the firm's ability to withstand competition, economic shocks, and technological changes through effective use of digital marketing tools.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory and supported by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to explain the relationship between digital marketing adoption and the growth of women-led SMEs in Nigeria. While RBV provides a strong foundation for understanding how digital marketing capabilities translate into performance and sustainability outcomes, TAM offers insights into the factors influencing the adoption of digital marketing technologies by women entrepreneurs.

Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV), advanced by Barney (1991), posits that firms attain sustained competitive advantage when they possess and effectively deploy resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). These strategic resources - whether tangible or intangible - enable firms to differentiate themselves from competitors in ways that are difficult to replicate. In essence, the possession and optimal utilization of high-quality, distinctive resources position firms uniquely within their industry and provide them with a durable competitive edge.

Within the SME context, especially in emerging economies, intangible resources such as knowledge, skills, technological capabilities, and customer relationships are critical drivers of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005). Digital marketing adoption constitutes a strategic intangible resource that enhances a firm's ability to reach customers, communicate value propositions, and respond to market dynamics efficiently.

For women-led SMEs in Nigeria, digital marketing capabilities - such as social media engagement, online branding, and digital customer relationship management - enable firms to overcome traditional constraints related to limited capital, restricted physical market access, and intense competition. By leveraging these capabilities, women entrepreneurs can improve sales growth, expand their customer base, and strengthen business sustainability. From the RBV perspective, sustained application of digital marketing strategies allows women-led SMEs to build enduring competitive advantages that support growth and long-term survival.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model, developed by Davis (1989) tries to offer some explanations   on the acceptance and use of technology by individuals based on two core constructs: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness is the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular technology will enhance job performance, while perceived ease of use reflects the extent to which the technology is

perceived as seamless or effortless to use. In the context of SMEs, TAM has been widely applied to explain the adoption of digital technologies by entrepreneurs - including digital marketing tools (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). With respect to women entrepreneurs, perceptions regarding the usefulness of digital marketing in increasing sales and attracting customers, as well as the ease of using digital platforms, play a crucial role in determining adoption decisions. Although TAM does not directly explain firm-level performance outcomes, it provides a complementary lens for understanding why women-led SMEs adopt digital marketing technologies. When digital marketing tools are perceived as beneficial and user-friendly, adoption likelihood increases, thereby enabling firms to develop the digital capabilities emphasized by RBV.

Theoretical Integration and Relevance to the Study
The integration of RBV and TAM offers a comprehensive theoretical foundation for this study. TAM explains the behavioural and perceptual factors that influence digital marketing adoption among women entrepreneurs, while RBV explains how the adopted digital marketing capabilities translate into sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability.

Empirical Review
Adewale and Osabuohien (2020) investigated the effect of digital marketing adoption on the productivity of small businesses in Nigeria, with the objective of determining whether digital marketing tools enhance firm performance. The study adopted a survey research design and collected data from 210 SME owners operating across selected states in Nigeria. Using structured questionnaires and multiple regression analysis, the findings revealed that digital marketing adoption had a significant positive effect on business productivity, particularly in terms of sales improvement and customer reach. The authors concluded that SMEs that actively adopt digital marketing tools are better positioned to achieve growth and competitiveness.

Chikandiwa, Samuel, and Mandipaka (2013) examined the relationship between digital marketing adoption and customer retention among SMEs, with the objective of assessing how online marketing practices influence customer-related outcomes. The study employed a quantitative research design and surveyed 150 SMEs operating in the retail and service sectors. Data were analyzed using correlation and regression techniques, and the results showed that digital marketing adoption significantly improved customer retention and relationship management. The study highlighted that consistent online engagement enhances customer loyalty and repeat patronage, supporting the relevance of digital marketing for customer growth.

Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) conducted a study to explore the usage of digital marketing channels among SMEs and their implications for business performance. The study utilized a cross-sectional survey design and targeted 331 SME managers in Finland. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were employed to analyze the data. The findings indicated that SMEs that effectively integrated digital marketing channels such as social media and

search engine marketing experienced improved customer acquisition and sales performance. The study emphasized that digital marketing capabilities contribute to both short-term performance and long-term business sustainability.

Olatunji, Ayagbe, and Adewale (2019) assessed the impact of digital business adoption on the performance of SMEs in Nigeria, with the objective of determining whether digital tools enhance growth outcomes. The study adopted a survey design and collected data from 180 SME operators in Lagos State. Using multiple regression analysis, the results revealed that digital adoption significantly influenced sales growth and market expansion. The authors concluded that SMEs leveraging digital platforms recorded higher growth rates than those relying solely on traditional marketing methods.

Fatoki and Chinomona (2019) examined the barriers to business growth among women entrepreneurs, with particular attention to the role of digital capabilities. The study employed a quantitative approach and surveyed 250 women-owned SMEs in South Africa. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used for data analysis. The findings showed that limited adoption of digital tools negatively affected business growth and sustainability, while women entrepreneurs who embraced digital marketing practices reported improved customer growth and long-term business stability. The study underscored the importance of digital capabilities in enhancing the sustainability of women-led enterprises.

Methodology

The study adopted a cross sectional research design to examine the structural relationships among digital marketing adoption, customer growth, sales growth, and business sustainability among women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because it enables the examination of relationships among variables at a single point in time while allowing for statistical generalization within a defined population. The target population comprised women-owned and women-managed SMEs that were actively operating within Nigeria during the period of data collection.

The sample size of 312 respondents was determined using Cochran's (1977) sample size determination formula for large populations, ensuring adequate statistical power and representativeness. A multistage sampling technique was employed. First, states with high SME concentration were purposively selected based on national MSME distribution data and entrepreneurial ecosystem reports. Evidence from the 2017 National MSME Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) indicates that Lagos and Oyo states account for some of the highest concentrations of SMEs in Nigeria (SMEDAN & NBS, 2017). In addition, ecosystem reports highlight Rivers and Kano states as major commercial hubs characterized by significant SME activity due to market access, infrastructure, and entrepreneurial dynamism (BusinessDay, 2024). Abia State was included to ensure representation from the South-East geopolitical zone and to capture emerging SME clusters within that region. Consequently, Lagos, Oyo, Rivers, Kano, and Abia were selected to provide broad geographical representation across major commercial corridors of Nigeria.

Following the purposive selection of states, women-owned and women-managed SMEs were identified through women entrepreneur associations, SME networks, and professional business platforms. Snowball sampling was subsequently applied to reach additional eligible respondents within these clusters. Owner-managers served as key informants because they are directly responsible for strategic decisions relating to digital marketing adoption and performance outcomes, thereby enhancing the accuracy of firm-level data. Although probability sampling was constrained by the absence of a comprehensive national database of women-led SMEs, the multistage approach improved coverage across diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems and strengthened external validity.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered electronically via Google Forms. The online mode of administration was considered appropriate for three reasons: first, the study examines digital marketing adoption, implying that respondents are digitally engaged; second, the respondents were geographically dispersed across multiple states; and third, digital distribution enabled efficient access to women entrepreneur associations, SME-focused WhatsApp groups, professional networks, and social media business communities. A total of 312 responses were received; however, 296 questionnaires were retained after screening for completeness, response consistency, and elimination of patterned responses, yielding a usable response rate of 94.9%.

The measurement instrument was developed in line with established constructs in digital marketing and SME growth literature. Digital marketing adoption was operationalized as the independent variable, while SME growth was measured using three dimensions: sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability. All items were measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree), thereby minimizing central tendency bias and encouraging response discrimination. Face and content validity were ensured through expert review by academics and practitioners with expertise in marketing and SME research. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, and all constructs exceeded the 0.70 benchmark recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to determine the mean and standard deviation of the variables. Multiple regression analysis was employed to test the hypothesized relationships at a 5% level of significance. Separate regression models were used to evaluate the effect of digital marketing adoption on sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability. This approach enabled the assessment of the independent contribution of digital marketing adoption to distinct dimensions of SME performance. The analytical strategy aligns with established quantitative approaches for examining firm-level performance determinants and provides empirical evidence on the role of digital marketing in enhancing the growth and sustainability of women-led SMEs in Nigeria.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings
The analysis includes descriptive statistics, reliability testing, Pearson correlation, multiple

regression analysis, mediation analysis, and structural model specification using SmartPLS. All hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

Response Rate

A total of 296 valid questionnaires were retrieved and analyzed. This number exceeds the minimum requirement for multivariate analysis and SEM, thereby increasing statistical power and generalizability of findings.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Digital Marketing Adoption (DMA)	5	0.90
Sales Growth (SG)	5	0.93
Customer Growth (CG)	5	0.94
Business Sustainability (BS)	5	0.93

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. Results are presented in the Table above. All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating excellent reliability (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
DMA	3.41	0.58
Sales Growth	3.36	0.61
Customer Growth	3.48	0.59
Business Sustainability	3.39	0.60

This table presents the mean and standard deviation of all study variables. The results indicate moderate to high agreement that digital marketing positively influences SME performance.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships among all variables. All correlations were statistically significant at $p < .001$.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4
DMA	1			
Sales Growth	.68**	1		
Customer Growth	.74**.	.82**	1	
Business Sustainability	.70**	.79**	.85**	1

Note: $p < .001$. Double asterisks indicate very high statistical significance.

This implies that digital marketing adoption is strongly and positively associated with sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability.

Regression Analysis

Hypothesis one

H₀1: Digital marketing adoption has no significant effect on the **sales growth** of women-led SMEs in Nigeria.

Table 4: Model Summary

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. error
.68	.46	.46	.44

ANOVA

F	Sig.
249.32	.000

Coefficients

Variable	B	Beta	t	Sig
Constant	0.72		6.21	.000
DMA	0.79	.68	15.79	.000

Decision: Reject Ho1.
Digital marketing adoption significantly predicts sales growth ($\beta = .68$, $p<.001$).

Hypothesis Two

H₀2: Digital marketing adoption has no significant effect on the **customer growth** of women-led SMEs in Nigeria.

$R^2 = .55$
$F = 359.41$
$\beta = .74$
$t = 18.96$
$p < .001$
Decision: Reject Ho2.

Hypothesis Three

H₀3: Digital marketing adoption has no significant effect on the **business sustainability** of women-led SMEs in Nigeria.

$R^2 = .49$
$F = 283.77$
$\beta = .70$
$t = 16.85$
$p < .001$
Decision: Reject Ho3.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation was tested using hierarchical regression.

Model Structure

Digital Marketing Adoption $\rightarrow$ Customer Growth $\rightarrow$ Sales Growth

Step 1: DMA $\rightarrow$ Sales Growth

$\beta = .68 \, (p < .001)$

Step 2: DMA $\rightarrow$ Customer Growth

$\beta = .74 \, (p < .001)$

Table 5: Step 3: DMA and Customer Growth $\rightarrow$ sales Growth

Predictor	β	T	Sig
DMA	.29	6.48	.000
Customer Growth	.61	13.72	.000

$R^2 = .70$

The coefficient of DMA decreased from .68 to .29 after introducing Customer Growth. Sobel Test = 9.84 (p < .001). This confirms partial mediation. Customer growth significantly mediates the relationship between digital marketing adoption and sales growth.

Structural Model (SmartPLS)

Structural model assessment showed that all hypothesized paths were significant (p < .05). The table below presents standardized path coefficients, t-values, and p-values.

Table 6: Structural Model Results

Path	β	T	p
DMA $\rightarrow$ CG	.74	19.22	.000
DMA $\rightarrow$ SG	.29	6.61	.000
CG $\rightarrow$ SG	.61	14.08	.000
DMA $\rightarrow$ BS	.70	17.43	.000

Table 7: R^2 Values

Endogenous Variable	R^2
Customer Growth	0.55
Sales Growth	0.70
Business Sustainability	0.49

The model demonstrates substantial explanatory power.

Discussion

This study examined the effect of digital marketing adoption on the performance of women-led SMEs, with customer growth serving as a mediating mechanism. The findings indicate that digital marketing adoption significantly enhances sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability. Furthermore, customer growth partially mediates the relationship

between digital marketing adoption and sales growth. The positive effect of digital marketing adoption on sales growth is consistent with the study by Ainin et al. (2015), which found that social media usage significantly improves firm performance among SMEs in Malaysia. It also corroborates the study of El-Gohary (2012) that found that e-marketing adoption positively influences competitive advantage and market performance.

The results also align with Tajudeen et al. (2018), who demonstrated that social media capability positively impacts organizational performance through customer relationship enhancement. This reinforces the argument that digital marketing tools strengthen customer interaction mechanisms, which subsequently influence financial outcomes. The strong relationship between digital marketing adoption and customer growth supports the view that digital platforms serve as powerful customer acquisition channels. Trainor et al. (2014) showed that social media capability enhances customer relationship performance, leading to increased customer engagement and loyalty. Likewise, Parveen et al. (2016) found that digital media adoption significantly improves customer responsiveness and brand visibility.

The present study confirms these findings by demonstrating that women-led SMEs leveraging digital tools experience measurable expansion in their customer base. The mediation analysis revealed that customer growth partially mediates the relationship between digital marketing adoption and sales growth. This finding supports the customer-centric growth mechanism suggested in SME digitalization literature. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) argue that digital marketing primarily influences firm performance by strengthening customer acquisition and engagement processes before financial gains materialize.

Similarly, Kumar et al. (2016) emphasize that customer engagement serves as an intermediary outcome linking marketing investments to financial performance. The partial mediation observed in this study confirms that digital marketing affects sales both directly and indirectly through customer expansion.

The findings provide empirical support for the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989). The significant positive relationships indicate that women entrepreneurs perceive digital marketing tools as useful, leading to actual adoption and improved performance outcomes. Furthermore, the results are consistent with the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), which posits that firms gain sustained competitive advantage through valuable and strategically deployed resources. Digital marketing capability functions as an intangible organizational resource that enhances competitiveness, customer acquisition, and sustainability. By integrating these two theoretical lenses, this study strengthens the argument that technology adoption and strategic resource deployment jointly explain SME performance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digital marketing adoption significantly enhances sales growth, customer growth, and business sustainability among women-led SMEs. Customer growth partially mediates the relationship between digital marketing and sales performance, confirming that digital strategies operate primarily through customer acquisition

mechanisms. The findings extend prior research conducted in other emerging economies and provide new empirical evidence from Nigeria. Importantly, the study reinforces the relevance of the Technology Acceptance Model and the Resource-Based View in explaining digital adoption and performance outcomes in SME contexts.

Recommendations

a. Women-Owned SMEs

1. **Strategic Investment in Digital Marketing Tools**
   Women entrepreneurs should leverage social media platforms, e-commerce systems, email marketing tools, and analytics technologies to improve market penetration and customer engagement.

2. **Prioritize Customer Acquisition and Retention**
   Since customer growth mediates sales performance, SMEs should develop structured digital customer engagement strategies.

3. **Capacity Building and Digital Skills Development**
   Continuous training in digital marketing analytics, content strategy, and online engagement should be prioritized to enhance effective utilization.

b. Policymakers and Support Agencies

1. **Digital Literacy and Training Programs**
   Government agencies such as Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria should organize targeted digital capacity-building initiatives for women entrepreneurs.

2. **Improve Access to Affordable Digital Infrastructure**
   Policies should facilitate access to online marketplaces, digital payment systems, and cloud-based marketing tools at subsidized rates.

3. **Evidence-Based SME Development Policies**
   Policymaking should be guided by continuous research into digital transformation and SME sustainability.

c. Future Research

1. Broaden geographical scope to include SMEs across multiple Nigerian states.
2. Examine additional mediating variables such as innovation capability, social media engagement intensity, or brand loyalty.
3. Conduct longitudinal studies to assess long-term sustainability impacts of digital adoption.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes the following contributions:

1. It provides empirical evidence that digital marketing adoption significantly improves sales growth, customer expansion, and business sustainability among women-owned SMEs.
2. It establishes customer growth as a key mediating mechanism in the adoption - performance relationship.

3. It extends the applicability of the Technology Acceptance Model and Resource-Based View to the Nigerian SME context.
4. It offers practical and policy-relevant insights for strengthening SME competitiveness through digital capability.

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