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BRAND IMAGE AND PERFORMANCE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
This study examined the effect of brand image on the performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Southeast Nigeria, with a specific focus on sales growth as a measure of performance. The study investigated five core components of brand image: brand awareness efforts, unique brand identity, brand reputation management, customer engagement initiatives, and digital branding. A descriptive research design was employed on a population of 5,278 selected registered Small and Medium Enterprises located in the selected states for the study: Anambra, Enugu and Abia in Southeast, Nigeria. A sample size of 300 SMEs was obtained using Multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using regression analysis via SPSS version 25. Findings revealed that all five components of brand image had statistically significant and positive effects on sales growth of SMEs. Specifically, digital branding and customer engagement emerged as the strongest predictors of sales performance, followed closely by brand reputation management, brand identity, and brand awareness. These results reveal the critical role of a well-developed brand image in enhancing SME competitiveness and market success. The study thus concludes that strategic brand management is essential for SME growth and recommends that business owners invest in brand development, adopt digital tools, and engage customers consistently to sustain improved performance.

Key words: *Brand Image, Sales Growth, Brand Awareness, Digital Branding, Customer Engagement, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Southeast Nigeria.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are globally recognized as vital engines for economic development, playing a pivotal role in employment generation, innovation, and contribution to GDP. In Nigeria, SMEs account for a significant portion of the economy, providing essential goods and services while serving as a key platform for income generation and poverty alleviation (Edoko, Agbasi & Ezeanolue, 2018; Bello, Jibir & Ahmed, 2018). Despite their strategic importance, many Nigerian SMEs struggle to realize their full potential due to challenges such as weak brand identity, limited visibility, and poor customer perception. Brand image, viewed as the perception customers have about a business, has become critical

in enhancing competitiveness and performance. A strong brand image builds trust, fosters customer loyalty, and creates a competitive edge necessary for sustainable growth (Mandizwidza-Moyo, Makgosa & Phambuka-Nsimbi, 2023; Agarwal, Gupta & Bantia, 2018). However, due to limited resources and branding knowledge, many SMEs in Southeast Nigeria find it difficult to develop and maintain a distinctive brand identity. Extant literature identifies key brand image components including brand awareness, identity, reputation management, customer engagement, and digital branding as essential drivers of SME performance (Latif et al., 2016; Zhang & Luo, 2019; Sharabati et al., 2024). Brand awareness enhances visibility and customer attraction; unique identity promotes recognition and loyalty; and reputation management fosters trust. Moreover, customer engagement through personalized marketing and social media interaction strengthens relationships, while digital branding enables broader market reach and relevance in today's digital economy. Empirical studies further affirm the link between brand image and business performance, particularly in terms of customer satisfaction, retention, and financial outcomes (Odoom, Narteh & Boateng, 2017; Guzmán, Ruiz & Siller, 2019).

In today's competitive market, brand image is no longer seen as a mere luxury but a necessity for the growth and sustainability of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), especially in Southeast, Nigeria, where SMEs drive economic growth and provide employment. Building an impactful brand image can help SMEs stand out, attract customers, and cultivate loyalty. However, many SMEs in Southeast, Nigeria, appear to be struggling to establish a recognizable brand, which may partly be due to limited resources and a lack of structured branding efforts. Arguably, variables like brand awareness effort, unique brand identity, brand reputation management, customer engagement initiatives, and digital branding play crucial roles in shaping brand images, each contributing to the business's performance in distinct yet interconnected ways. From anecdotal evidence, for SMEs, the level of customer recognition is often directly proportional to market reach. Thus, in a crowded market, potential customers are more inclined to purchase from brands they recognize and trust. SMEs prioritizing immediate operational needs over branding efforts inadvertently do not actively invest in brand awareness activities thus limiting their visibility and, consequently, their sales potential (Ukeme et al., 2024). This lack of visibility could be responsible for their inability to attract more customers and boost sales.

Again and arguably, a unique identity comprising logos, taglines, and core brand values helps customers associate certain qualities with the brand, making it easier for SMEs to carve out a

niche in the market. However, from observations, SMEs in Southeast, Nigeria, either lack a defined brand identity or fail to communicate it effectively, resulting in a diluted market presence. Besides, many SMEs seem to lack structured channels to manage and monitor their reputations, which may have left them vulnerable to reputational damage from unresolved issues or poor customer experiences. Customer engagement initiatives are therefore crucial to bring the brand closer to customers, fostering a sense of connection and loyalty that drives repeat business (Ukeme et al., 2024; Ojeleye et al., 2023). In this regard, SMEs in Southeast, Nigeria, may need to utilize such activities like loyalty programs, personalized marketing, social media interaction and digital branding in order to create memorable experiences and build long-term relationships which will bring about effective customer engagement and opportunities to strengthen brand loyalty. Furthermore, there is a notable lack of empirical research and localized data on the specific impact of brand image on SME performance within Southeast Nigeria. While some broader studies have explored the link between brand image and business outcomes (Ojeleye et al., 2023; Cambra-Fierro, 2021), most existing research (Olowe et al., 2024; Oguh et al., 2023; Bello et al., 2018) primarily focuses on SMEs outside the Southeast region. This research gap suggests that SME operators in Southeast Nigeria may lack access to context-specific, evidence-based insights necessary for building and managing effective brand strategies. In the absence of such tailored knowledge, it becomes challenging for policymakers, consultants, and business owners to implement precise interventions aimed at improving performance. Thus, this study seeks to investigate how brand image impacts the performance of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria, with a focus on how branding strategies can be leveraged to enhance growth and competitiveness in a dynamic market environment.

1.1 Objectives

The broad objective of the study is to examine the effect of brand image on the performance of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. determine the effect of brand awareness effort on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.
2. ascertain the effect of unique brand identity on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.
3. examine the effect of brand reputation management on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.
4. evaluate the effect of customer engagement initiatives on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

5. determine the effect of digital branding on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

1.2 Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. What is the effect of brand awareness effort on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria?
2. To what extent does unique brand identity affect sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria?
3. What is the effect of brand reputation management on sales growth among Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria?
4. What effect has customer engagement initiatives on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria?
5. To what extent is the effect of digital branding on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria?

1.3 Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated in their null form:

Ho_1: Brand awareness efforts have no significant effect on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

Ho_2: Unique brand identity has no significant effect on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

H_{o3}: There is no significant effect of brand reputation management on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

Ho_4: Customer engagement initiatives have no significant effect on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

Ho_5: There is no significant effect of digital branding on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Brand Image

A brand is a unique blend of functional and emotional attributes that offers added value and distinct experiences to consumers (Kenton, 2023). It includes names, symbols, slogans, and design elements that differentiate a company's offerings from competitors (Altayyar, 2020; AMA, 2023). Beyond visual identity, a brand represents the company's values, reputation, and strategic essence (Margarita, 2018). Strong brands enhance customer perception, reduce sales costs, and provide competitive advantage (Dung, 2021; Andrew, 2023). Brand image according to Jenna (2022) plays vital role in the life of every business in the following manner: A positive brand image influences customers' perceptions, which leads to better business-customer relationships thus increasing customer satisfaction. Branding is therefore essential for SMEs, helping them stand out in competitive markets and building lasting customer relationships (Edna et al., 2023; Yapra, 2024). A successful brand fosters trust, communicates a firm's personality, and protects its identity (Kenton, 2020). In line with the above, Uchelor & Ijaiya (2021) added that every organization strives to build a strong image as it helps in fulfilling their business motives.

2.1.2 Sales Growth

Sales growth according to Allan (2024) is a metric that measures the ability of the sales team to increase revenue over a fixed period of time. It is a strategic indicator that is used in decision making by executives and the board of directors, and references the formulation and execution of business strategy. It depicts the amount a company derives from sales compared to a previous corresponding period of time in which the later sales exceed the former. As stated by Hitesh (2023), sales growth is the parameter which is used to measure the performance of the sales team to increase revenue over a predetermined period of time. Hanmaikyur (2021) adds that sales growth is considered positive for a company's survival and profitability. Thus, emphasis on sales growth provides a useful and visible benchmark to motivate managers to effectively reach their financial objectives. Allan (2024) concludes that increase in sales growth of any organization increases its revenue. It is therefore an essential parameter for survival and financial growth of a company (Hitesh, 2023).

2.1.3 Brand Reputation Management

Brand reputation management is the process of monitoring how consumers perceive a brand and taking strategic actions to improve the brand's image (Forsey, 2023). This centers on monitoring and safeguarding the organizations brands online reputation in online review sites, social media and google. Kylie (2023) opines that brand reputation is the perception that customers, employees, partners and others have of a brand. The stronger the reputation is the more people will trust and advocate for the brand. Stakeholders' opinion about a brand can be shaped by both direct and indirect experiences and can be influenced by factors outside the user experiences. For instance, people's opinion of a brand can be impacted by things like the enterprises activism and philanthropy, internal employee policies, as well as its partners' own brand reputations. Consumers also can be influenced by the behavior of their friends and family or other influential people (Kylie, 2023). Consequently, Forsey (2023) states that whenever a brand develops a reputation that isn't connecting with its target customers, the businesses have the chance to rebrand.

2.1.4 Customer Engagement Initiatives

Customer engagement refers to the ongoing relationship between a brand and consumers across online/offline channels (Tarver, 2024). It is the way brands actively build an ongoing relationship with their customers. Smart survey (2023) reports that customer engagement is the deep-rooted relationship and rapport that a business cultivates with its patrons. It is not just about a single purchase or fleeting interaction; rather, it's an ongoing association, a set of experiences that unfold overtime. The deeper the connection between the business and individual customers, the more loyal those customers are likely to become. This in turn can translate to greater profitability, visibility and competitive resilience for the business. Customer Engagement Initiatives are strategies designed to interact with customers in meaningful ways that strengthen their connection to a brand, foster loyalty, and encourage ongoing interactions. These initiatives help build a community, drive customer satisfaction, and ultimately support business growth by turning customers into brand advocates (Tarver, 2024).

2.1.5 Unique Brand Identity

Brand identity can be defined as that which describes the externally visible elements of a brand that identify and distinguish the brand in consumers' minds (Tarver, 2024). This includes the visual aspects of a brand, for instance, colour, design and logo. Gibbins (2024) adds that it is composed of various branding elements such as a company's name, logo, visual

elements, language and tone of voice. It also includes the type of language and interactions a brand has with consumers (Tarver, 2024). A unique brand identity is thus the distinct personality and positioning that sets a brand apart from its competitors and makes it instantly recognizable to its audience. It equally describes the way a brand interacts with customers across different channels, such as its website, social media, and email (Ali, Aliveza & Aghil, 2017). They further posit that brand identity is an internal construct that emanates unilaterally from the organization to what managers want the brand to be and that requires stability.

2.1.6 Digital Branding

Digital branding according to Escamilla (2018) connotes a brand management technique that uses the combination of branding on the internet and digital marketing to develop a brand through a wide range of digital sales, including internet-based relationships and applications based devices or media content. It is a business identity, visibility and credibility among advocates who discover, relate to, and interact with the business online (Hank, 2017). This simply means that it is all about creating and establishing brand's story and presence in the digital realm. As people nowadays use digital devises instead of visiting physical shops, digital marketing campaigns have become prevalent, employing combination of search engine optimization, content marketing, influence marketing, content automation, campaign marketing, data driven marketing, e-commerce marketing, social media marketing, social media optimization, e-mail direct marketing, display advertising, e-books, and optical disks and games (Hank, 2017). Rauschnabel et al (2018) therefore conclude that a robust digital branding strategy significantly enhances customer satisfaction, resulting in increased repeated purchases and brand advocacy.

2.1.7 Brand Awareness Efforts

The establishment of Brand Awareness fosters a sense of trust among consumers towards the perceived quality of a brand, potentially leading them to favour it over other brands with which they are less familiar. This trust building aspect of brand awareness is crucial in shaping consumer's preferences and loyalty towards a particular brand. It instills a sense of reliability and credibility thereby increasing the sales of the firm and overall performance for the organization (Chakavavarthy & Chandramohan, 2024).Gomez (2024) is emphatic that brand awareness efforts are strategies and actions a business takes to make its brand recognizable and memorable to a target audience as well as creating an identity and presence in the market, allowing customers to become familiar with the brand's name, logo, values, and products or services.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Luo Ziming's theory of brand image as indicated in Zhang 2019. Ziming noted that the brand rudiments in individual psychology help to checkmate their choice of brand. The theory states that brand image is the comprehensive reflection of brand elements in people's psychology and people's subjective evaluation of the brand. This theory is significant to this study because it provides a comprehensive means for understanding the multidimensional nature of brand image and its impact on consumer behaviour. Therefore it assists Small and Medium Enterprises operators/owners or manufacturers to understand what makes up brand image and how to abide by it in order to achieve improved consumers' loyalty to their products or services thereby improving the organizational performances.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research design used for this study is descriptive survey research design which is a fundamental method in the field of research where the primary method of data collection is through surveys. This type of research design allows the researcher to collect structured data from individuals or groups to gain deeper insights into their thoughts, behaviors, or experiences as it relates to brand image and performance of SMEs. Survey design is highly valued in this research because it is an accessible and efficient way for respondents to share their perspectives

The population of the study comprises 5,278 selected registered Small and Medium Enterprises located in the selected states for the study: Anambra, Enugu and Abia in Southeast, Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique involving both purposive and random sampling methods was employed. According to Chukwuemeka (2002), multi-stage sampling is somewhat the combination of the other sampling techniques. At least, it combines two methods. At the first stage, three states were purposively selected based on their high concentration of SMEs. At the second stage, five Local Government Areas (LGAs) were randomly selected from each state. Within each LGA, two business clusters were purposively chosen based on their level of SME activity. Finally, ten SMEs were selected from each cluster using simple random or systematic sampling, leading to a total sample size of 300 SMEs. Data were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics and the hypotheses were tested using regression analysis with the aid of Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS version 25) at 5% level of significance. Therefore, the model for this study is stated as follows: The structural form of the model is:

SLG = f (, BAE, UBI, BRM, CEI, DBG)…….Eqn 1.

The mathematical form of the model is:

$BNL = \beta_0 + \beta_1 BAE + \beta_2 UBI + \beta_3 BRM + \beta_4 CEI + \beta_5 DBG$…….Eqn 2.

The econometric form of the model is:

$BNL = \beta_0 + \beta_1 BAE + \beta_2 UBI + \beta_3 BRM + \beta_4 CEI + \beta_5 DBG + \mu_i$ ….Eqn 3

Where; SLG = Sales Growth

BAE = Brand Awareness Effort

UBI = Unique Brand Identity

BRM = Brand Reputation Management

CEI = Customer Engagement Initiatives

BDG = Digital Branding

β_0 = Intercept of the model

$\beta_1 - \beta_5$ = Parameters of the regression coefficients

μ_i = Stochastic error term

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Data Analysis

Table 1. Distribution of Questionnaire

S/N	Selected State	No. Distributed	No. Returned	No. Analysed
1	Abia State	100	92	92
2	Anambra State	100	97	97
3	Enugu State	100	96	96
	Total (Percentage)	300 (100%)	285 (95%)	285 (95%)

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The table above indicates the number of questionnaire distributed to the respondents and the valid total number of returned questionnaire.

4.2 Test of Hypotheses

4.2.1 Hypothesis One

H_{o1}: Brand awareness efforts have no significant effect on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

Table 2. Coefficients Analysis for Hypothesis one

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	-.292	.053		-5.551	.000	-.395	-.189
	brand awareness efforts of SMEs in South Eastern, Nigeria	.975	.013	.899	77.431	.000	.951	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Sales growth of SMEs in South East Nigeria

Source: SPSS version 25

Table 2 above reveals the results of the linear regression analysis conducted on the effect of brand awareness efforts on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria. The unstandardized coefficient for brand awareness efforts is 0.975, meaning that for every one-unit increase in brand awareness efforts, the sales growth of SMEs is expected to increase by approximately 0.975 units, holding all other variables constant. This is a strong positive effect. The p-value is 0.000, which is less than the conventional alpha level of 0.05 indicating that the effect of brand awareness efforts on sales growth is statistically significant. The standardized coefficient (Beta) of 0.899 suggests a very strong positive relationship between brand awareness efforts and sales growth. This means brand awareness is a major predictor of sales growth. The 95% confidence interval for the effect size (B) does not include zero, further confirming the significance and reliability of the result. The negative constant (-0.292) represents the estimated value of sales growth when brand

awareness efforts are zero. Since the p-value is less than 0.05 and the confidence interval does not include zero, we reject the null hypothesis (Ho_1) and conclude that brand awareness efforts have a significant and positive effect on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast Nigeria.

4.2.2 Hypothesis Two

H_{o2}: Unique brand identity has no significant effect on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

Table 3. Coefficients Analysis for Hypothesis two

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	-.331	.044		-7.508	.000	-.418	-.245
	unique brand identity of SMEs	.990	.011	.924	92.215	.000	.969	1.011

a. Dependent Variable: sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria

Source: SPSS version 25

The Table 3 above reveals the results of the linear regression analysis conducted on the effect of unique brand identity on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria. The unstandardized coefficient for unique brand identity is 0.990. This means that for every 1-unit increase in unique brand identity, the sales growth of SMEs is expected to increase by 0.990 units**,** assuming other factors remain constant. This is a strong and nearly one-to-one positive effect and a clear indication that building a strong, unique brand identity strongly contributes to sales growth. The p-value is 0.000, which is well below the conventional 0.05 threshold, showing that the effect of unique brand identity on sales growth is statistically significant, and the null hypothesis (Ho_2) should be rejected. The

standardized beta value of 0.924 indicates a very strong positive relationship between unique brand identity and sales growth, relative to other possible predictors in a standardized form. The 95% confidence interval (0.969, 1.011) for the coefficient does not include zero, reinforcing the conclusion that the effect is significant and reliable. The negative constants -0.331 implies that when unique brand identity is zero, the expected sales growth is -0.331 units which is negative. Since the effect is positive, strong, and statistically significant**,** we reject the null hypothesis (Ho_2) and conclude that unique brand identity has a significant and positive effect on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast Nigeria.

4.2.3 Hypothesis Three

H_{o3}: There is no significant effect of brand reputation management on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

Table 4. Coefficients Analysis for Hypothesis three

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	.263	.025		10.370	.000	.213	.313
	brand reputation management of SMEs in South Eastern Nigeria	.927	.007	.966	141.084	.000	.914	.939

a. Dependent Variable: Sales Growth of SMEs In South Eastern, Nigeria

Source: SPSS version 25

Table 4 above reveals the results of the linear regression analysis conducted on the effect of brand reputation management on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria. The unstandardized coefficient of 0.927 means that for every 1-unit increase in brand reputation management efforts**,** the sales growth of SMEs is expected to increase by 0.927 units, holding other variables constant. This

shows a very strong positive effect. The p-value is 0.000**,** which is far below 0.05. This means the result is highly statistically significant, so we can confidently reject the null hypothesis (Ho_3). A Beta value of 0.966 indicates an extremely strong positive relationship between brand reputation management and sales growth. The **c**onfidence interval (0.914, 0.939) is very narrow and entirely above zero, confirming high precision and reliability of the estimate. The constant of 0.263 means that when brand reputation management is at zero, the predicted sales growth is 0.263 units. It is also statistically significant (t = 10.370), hence, since the coefficient is large, the t-value is high, and the p-value is very small, we reject the null hypothesis (Ho_3) and conclude brand reputation management has a significant and highly positive effect on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast Nigeria.

4.2.4 Hypothesis Four

H_{o4}: Customer engagement initiatives have no significant effect on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

Table 5. Coefficients Analysis for Hypothesis Four

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	-.003	.023		-.119	.906	-.049	.043
	customer engagement initiatives of SMEs in the South Eastern , Nigeria	1.002	.006	.974	163.732	.000	.990	1.014

a. Dependent Variable: sales growth of the SMEs in South eastern, Nigeria

Source: SPSS version 25

Again,Table 5 above reveals the results of the linear regression analysis conducted on the effect of customer engagement initiatives on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria. The unstandardized coefficient of 1.002 means that for every **1**-unit increase in customer engagement initiatives**,** the sales growth of SMEs is expected to increase by 1.002 units. This shows an exceptionally strong and nearly one-to-one positive effect. The p-value of 0.000 < 0.05 indicates the effect is highly statistically significant and provides a strong reason to reject the null hypothesis (Ho_4)**.** A Beta of 0.974 equally reveals a very strong standardized relationship between customer engagement and sales growth. The confidence interval (0.990, 1.014***)*** is narrow and completely above zero, indicating the result is both precise and reliable**.** The constant (intercept) of -0.003 is not statistically significant (p = 0.906), which means it does not contribute meaningful information. Given the very high t-value (163.732), very low p-value (0.000), and strong coefficients, we reject the null hypothesis (Ho_4) and conclude customer engagement initiatives have a significant and very strong positive effect on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast Nigeria.

4.2.5 Hypothesis Five

H_{o5}: There is no significant effect of digital branding on sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria.

Table 6. Coefficients Analysis for Hypothesis Five

Coefficients[a]								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	.436	.024		18.013	.000	.389	.484
	digital branding of SMEs' products in the south eastern Nigeria	.911	.006	.966	141.165	.000	.898	.924

a. Dependent Variable: Sales Growth of the SMEs in the South Eastern Nigeria

Source: SPSS version 25

The Table 6 above reveals the results of the linear regression analysis conducted on the effect of digital branding on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast, Nigeria. The unstandardized coefficient of 0.911 means that a 1-unit increase in digital branding efforts leads to an expected 0.911 unit increase in sales growth which indicates a strong and positive effect of digital branding on SME performance. The p-value is 0.000**,** which is well below the 0.05 threshold. This shows the effect is highly statistically significant, so we reject the null hypothesis (Ho_5)**.** A Beta of 0.966 suggests a very strong positive standardized relationship between digital branding and sales growth. The confidence interval is narrow and does not include zero, indicating the estimate is both precise and reliable. The constant is statistically significant (t = 18.013, p = 0.000)**.** The results are highly statistically significant**,** with strong coefficients and a high t-value. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis (Ho_5) and conclude digital branding has a significant and strong positive effect on the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises in Southeast Nigeria.

4.3 Summary of the Findings

1. The result showed a statistically significant and strong positive effect of brand awareness efforts on sales growth (B = 0.975, t = 77.431, p < 0.05). This implies that increased brand awareness efforts significantly enhance sales growth.
2. The analysis revealed that unique brand identity has a significant and positive effect on sales growth (B = 0.990, t = 92.215, p < 0.05). This indicates that SMEs with a distinctive brand identity experience higher sales growth.
3. Brand reputation management was found to have a significant and strong positive influence on sales growth (B = 0.927, t = 141.084, p < 0.05). This suggests that maintaining a positive brand reputation significantly boosts sales performance among SMEs. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected.
4. The results demonstrated a very strong and significant positive effect of customer engagement on sales growth (B = 1.002, t = 163.732, p < 0.05). This implies that SMEs that actively engage with their customers enjoy greater sales growth.

5. The analysis indicated a strong and statistically significant effect of digital branding on sales growth (B = 0.911, t = 141.165, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that digital branding strategies contribute greatly to the improvement of sales among SMEs. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that brand image is a critical driver of SME sales growth and overall business success. In today's competitive landscape, SMEs must go beyond product quality and pricing by strategically building strong, recognizable brands. The study revealed that brand awareness, unique brand identity, brand reputation management, customer engagement, and digital branding significantly influence sales growth. These elements enhance customer trust, loyalty, and market visibility, all of which are essential for competitive advantage and long-term sustainability. Specifically, brand awareness improves visibility and consumer familiarity; unique identity fosters differentiation and emotional connection; reputation management strengthens trust and value perception; customer engagement boosts satisfaction and retention; while digital branding extends market reach and enhances interaction in the digital economy. Therefore, SMEs that adopt an integrated brand-building strategy which encompasses awareness, identity, reputation, engagement, and digital presence are better positioned to achieve sustained growth, increased market share, and improved financial performance.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. SMEs should allocate resources to consistent brand promotion through advertising, social media, sponsorships, and public relations to increase their visibility and consumer recall.

2. Enterprises should focus on crafting unique brand elements such as logos, taglines, packaging, and storytelling that differentiate them from competitors and create emotional connections with customers.

3. SMEs must actively manage their reputation by delivering quality products/services, addressing customer complaints promptly, encouraging reviews, and maintaining transparency in business practices.

4. Businesses should adopt strategies like loyalty programs, feedback systems, personalized communication, and social media interaction to maintain meaningful customer relationships and drive repeat sales.

5. SMEs must embrace digital tools such as websites, e-commerce platforms, email marketing, and content marketing to reach a wider audience, especially in today's tech-driven market landscape.

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