

The Interplay of Digital Marketing Dimensions and Customer's Patronage of Fast Food Industries in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *This study was carried out in order to examine the effect of digital marketing dimensions on customer patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State. The researchers adopted a survey research technique for this study. The population of the study was sixty-four (64) customers of registered fast food industries operating in Akwa Ibom State. A sample size of 361 customers were drawn from the population using quota sampling techniques from across the four major cities in Akwa Ibom State that visited the eateries during the period of data collection for the study. The digital marketing dimensions (independent variable) considered for this study were Social Media Marketing (SMM), Email Marketing (EM) and Search Engine Optimization (SEO). The dependent variable was Customer Patronage. Using a 5 point Likert scale, the hypotheses stated were tested using simple linear regression model at a 5% level of significance. From the data analysis, the major findings revealed that there is a significant relationship between each of the three variables of digital marketing (social media, email marketing, search engine marketing) and customer patronage of fast food in Akwa Ibom state. The result of the first hypothesis shows that social media marketing influences customer patronage of fast food in Akwa Ibom State with a regression coefficient of 0.687. The result of the second hypothesis also reveals a regression coefficient of 0.694 which denotes that there is a strong positive relationship between email marketing and customer patronage in Akwa Ibom State. The third hypothesis reveals a regression coefficient of 0.688 which denotes that there is a strong positive relationship between search engine optimization and customer patronage of fast food in Akwa Ibom State. From the finding, it was concluded that digital marketing dimensions can increase customer patronage at any point in time. Based on the findings, it was recommended that marketing campaign should be emphasized on social media platforms since the age group in those platforms constitutes the people with interest in patronizing fast food product. Also, management should place adverts on popular search engines so as to go global. By doing this, vendors will be able to reach more customers, have steady link between the products and brands with their customers, enhance their sales volume and guide them on how to improve their products with reference to customers' feedback, mitigate increased competition, and create avenue to access new markets.*

KEYWORDS: digital marketing, fast food industries, customer's patronage

INTRODUCTION

Before now, marketing activities were done in traditional ways which involves the use of traditional channels such as billboards, printed media and broadcasting stations in the advertising of goods and service. Not until the development of the internet in the 1990's, traditional marketing was pretty much the only type of marketing. This revolution from the traditional marketing has set in motion in marketing activities to the modern way of marketing which is the "Digital Marketing" or "Internet Marketing" or "Online Marketing" or "Electronic Marketing" or "Web-Marketing". The Online also referred to as "Internet" has changed the world we live in as it has made the business environment to be increasingly dynamic. Its growth in use has led to the decline of the traditional marketing tools of mass media: television, radio, newspapers and magazines to the adoption of digital marketing which has to do with the usage of mobile devices, internet, search engines, social media, and other electronic medium to reach consumers. Digital marketing is a new way of approaching customers and understanding how customers behave and make purchases compared to traditional marketing. This marketing utilizes the internet and telecommunication tools to reach the target customer of the company (Menberu, 2017).

Different companies have designed their web pages to become accessible with the use of computers, tablets, smart phones and other electronic devices to reach multitudes of internet users around the globe on a daily basis. Thus, bringing a lot of opportunities to companies as their products can spread to a large group of people at a time (Menberu, 2017). Digital marketing has become a valuable addition to the traditional marketing approach that enable even small businesses to compete favourably with big businesses as it does not recognize the size and types of the business. It has create a strategy that assist businesses to deliver the right messages of their goods or services to the right audience and its activities and processes help to find, attract, win and retain customers because most of the marketing activities are done over the internet. The scope of digital marketing has become broader than that of the traditional marketing as the traditional marketing has limitation in coverage compared to digital marketing due to the portability of the devices used in this marketing. This has enable firms to continuously appeal to both their customers and prospective buyers because the online facilities provide all-round "24/7" service to its users, which facilitate firms having a constant relationship with their customer worldwide, and their customer shopping or ordering product at any time. This has resulted in cost effectiveness in the use of digital marketing as the cost of digital marketing is nothing compared to that of traditional marketing, since many social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Google plus has allowed businesses to advertise and promote their products or services free of charge. Rogers (2004) opined that internet channels are cost effective and it allow for dialogue between the business and their customers. This will allow marketers to have a direct contact with their present and prospective customers frequently, thereby increasing their level of personalization and interactivity with low

or non-excessive cost as well as enhance customer awareness about the brand which will result in customer patronage.

According to Etuk, Anyadighibe, Amadi & James (2022), it has witnessed constant establishment of various fast food joints, fondly mentioned as eateries in almost every nooks and crannies of the country. A peep at any street corner in Nigeria, now, especially in the urban centres, may likely make known at least two eateries with their front-lit menu boards jostling for customers' attention. This submits that the sector is gaining acceptance among customers (Salami & Ajobo, 2012). Supporting this statement, Akinbola, Ogunnaike & Ojo (2013) opined that fast food industry in Nigeria today is a beehive of activities and is gaining a lot of attention both inside and outside the country. Industry trends such as fast outlet expansion, strategic alliances (particularly with firms in downstream sector of the oil and gas industry), and entrant of foreign players amongst others lends credence to the perceived phenomenal increase in the number of fast food industries. Mustapha, Fakokunde & Awolusi (2014) similarly stated that the number of fast food outlets in Nigeria is increasing at a geometric rate and it is expected to double in five years. According to Ahmed, Hossain, Malek & Begum (2008), consuming fast foods has become a new trend among upper society, teenagers and youths have also amplified and the fast food has won the appreciation of those groups. The attractiveness of fast food industries in every growing city of the world is as the result of the effect of globalization (Tabassum & Rahman, 2012). Thus, every segment of the society now patronizes fast food.

To increase customer's patronage of these fast food industries which are fast spreading around the cities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, the use of digital marketing has been introduced to help the industries market and brand their company's product on the internet for prospective and present customers to access and make purchases. Apart from making purchases, digital marketing helps in reaching a global audience, providing clear product information at a lower cost, keeping your customers up-to-date, build brand recognition, showcasing all your options to your customers, enhancing comparison shopping and obtaining valuable traffic on the company's page which helps in business grow. Digital marketing is a vital concept which allows companies to reach out to new customers and provide personalized communication to them, thus, increasing awareness and sales. It helps in enhancing customer patronage as high intensity of digital marketing can lead to a corresponding increase in customer patronage.

Customer patronage involves the level of consent or support conveyed in order to stir customer's exhibition of repurchase or recurrence intention and satisfaction towards using a brand (Anetoh & Moguluwa, 2018). The extent of patronage is motivated by customer's behavioural, attitudinal and psychological commitment and readiness to incur extra cost towards repurchasing a product amidst other substitutes. Customer patronage is often measured by patronage intention, actual patronage, repeat patronage and customer loyalty towards a brand even in the midst of change in quality and price. According to Kotler (2007), consumers have varying degree of patronage to

specific products and services. Also, customer patronage inspires consumer loyalty and retention which helps companies to build their brand or products, grow their market share, promptly deliver services and create marketing improvement strategies. It provides for a stable and growing market share as the cost of winning customers is six times as much as retaining existing ones (Nyakweba & Wesonga, 2015).

The present fast food industry is highly commercialized and categorized by various pre-formulated procedures and food preparation methods commonly set up with the intention of curtailing production cost and delivery time (Etuk, Anyadighibe, Amadi & James, 2022). One of the ways in which fast food industries can conveniently meet their customers' needs is by marketing their products accessible through digital devices. This involves the use of various digital marketing dimensions to reach their target audience. In realizing their goal, fast food industries market and brand their product on the internet for prospective and present customers to patronize. Increasing customer's patronage in the fast food industries requires the adoption of various digital marketing dimensions. Thus, in the course of measuring digital marketing, various dimensions of digital marketing have been discovered. They include audience participation, viral campaigns, customer feedback, offline communication, online partnership. Others are publisher outreach, branch protection, paid search, pay-per-click, content marketing, influencer marketing and mobile marketing. However, the digital marketing dimensions considered for the purpose of this study were social media marketing, email marketing and search engine optimizations. These dimensions were adopted to examine their effect on customer's patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

Statement of the Problem

With the effect of globalization, fast food industries have increasingly become popular in Akwa Ibom State and have increased in their numbers. So also have customers increased in their numbers, taste and preference. What determines a customer's choice of selecting or patronizing a fast food industry differs from city to city and from region to region as a result of cultural, environmental socioeconomic and technological specifics. In order to achieve maximum patronage from customers, all this specific needs to be taken into consideration. The technological specifics have received interests and benefits in many aspects due to its ease of use, convenience and portability of its operation. Companies all over the globe have taken advantage of it and use it as the core in the operation of their businesses. Customers on the other hand are looking for ways of meeting their needs conveniently without incurring additional cost and one of the ways of achieving this, is through digital marketing where they can comfortably stay at homes and offices to make enquires and order for foods without any physical contact.

Increasing customer's patronage is a principal task of any organization and for an organization to achieve this, the right digital marketing dimensions that influence customer's patronage need to be understudied. It was based on these premises that the researcher carried out this study in order

to articulate on what constitutes excellent digital marketing in order to make for effective customer patronage in fast food industries and to determine the effect digital marketing has on customer patronage in fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to assess the effect of digital marketing dimensions on customer patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State. The specific objectives were;

- i.To examine the effect of Social Media Marketing on Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii.To determine the effect of Email Marketing on Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.
- iii.To examine the effect of Search Engine Optimization on Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated from the objectives of the study as stated below:

- i.To what extent does Social Media Marketing affect Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State?
- ii.To what extent does Email Marketing affect Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State?
- iii.To what extent does Search Engine Optimization affect Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State?

Hypotheses of the Study

The following null hypotheses were formulated for the study.

HO₁: Social Media Marketing has no significant effect on Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

HO₂: Email Marketing has no significant effect on Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

HO₃: Search Engine Optimization has no significant effect on Customer's Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Digital Marketing

The term digital marketing has been defined as the use of internet and digital media capabilities to assist in selling of goods and services (Menberu, 2017). It involves the use a wide range of technologies like electronic media and applications in conducting marketing research and communication activities. Digital marketing uses all facets of internet advertising to generate response from the prospected customers. According to Menberu (2017) web technologies have revolutionized the marketing environment by adding value to the traditional marketing activities

irrespective of the size and type of business. Rajarajan (2016) referred to digital marketing as a set of powerful tools and methodologies used for promoting products and services through the Internet. Nizam (2015) opined that digital marketing is the marketing of goods and services by means of the internet. In the past, marketing was conducted via telegraph a concept which has since been expanded with the introduction of electronic media such as TV, radio, email and telephone. Recently, the trend is that customer prefers using the internet in their purchase decision for purchasing of goods and services. Because of the multitude of marketing channels online, digital marketing employs a wider range of marketing elements unlike the traditional marketing. Digital marketing is interchangeably used together with Internet marketing (i-marketing), online marketing or web marketing. As with conventional marketing, Menberu (2017) contended that digital marketing implies creating a strategy that helps businesses deliver the right messages and products to the right audience.

From the few definitions of the concept of digital marketing adumbrated above, one can deduce that there is consensus on the meaning of the concept of digital marketing as the practice of promoting goods and services using all the medium of electronic technologies. Digital marketing refers to any marketing effort that involves the internet, digital technologies or an electronic device. The dimensions of digital marketing according to Gandour & Regolini (2011) include publisher outreach, branch protection, paid search, pay-per-click, content marketing, influencer marketing and mobile marketing. However, for the course of this study, the dimensions of digital marketing adopted by the researcher to suit the fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State were social media marketing, email marketing and search engine optimizations. These dimensions were tested to see their effect on customer's patronage.

Digital marketing variables

The three variables of digital marketing adopted for this study were social media marketing, email marketing and search engine optimizations.

Social Media Marketing: There is a general consensus by scholars on the meaning of the concept of social media marketing. Marketing researchers like Assaad & Gómez (2011) and Neti (2011) defined social media marketing as the attempt to use social media channels (MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Whatapp and Twitter) to persuade clients that one's firm, goods and/or services are worthwhile. Social media marketing is the promotion of goods and services via social media handles (Olotewo, 2016). Tuten (2008) captures social media marketing as a form of online advertising that uses the cultural context of social communities, including social networks (e.g. YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook), virtual worlds (e.g. second life, there and kaneva), social news sites (e.g. Diggs and Delicious) and social opinion-sharing sites (e.g. Epinions), to meet branding and communication objectives. According to Uford, Charles & Etuk (2022), social media sites provide an electronic forum that gives individual consumers the opportunity in commenting personally about the product, as well as access to product information that simplifies their purchase decisions. Social media marketing involves the creation of appealing content on different social

media sites to create awareness and gain new and existing customer's attention; it involves marketing through online communities and social networks as conflicting to traditional marketing channels like radio, television and print media (Olotewo, 2016). Ramsaran-Fowdar & Fowdar (2013) stated that social media marketing is a useful tool to manage existing firm-client relationships while creating new ones, by facilitating online exchange, connection and communication. This supports the assumption that social media channels can be used to increase customer patronage and customer retention. According to Olotewo, (2016), social media marketing is imperative for firms aiming to attract and retain clients. The increased in the use of social media platform such as: the Facebook, YouTube, twitter among others had paved way for the exchange of information among consumers. Information on an organization's offering, that is made available on the social network platform could be negative or positive and could do untold good or damage on an organization's prosperity (Eze, Nnabuko & Etuk, 2014).

Email Marketing: This is a form of direct marketing which uses electronic mail as a means of communicating commercial or personal messages to an audience. Every e-mail sent to a potential or existing customer could be considered e-mail marketing. Email marketing is ad copy comprising an entire email or a portion of an email message. They may be unsolicited, in which case the sender may give the recipient an option to opt-out of future emails, or it may be sent with the recipient's prior consent. As a tool of strengthening customer relationship, e-mail marketing helps companies keep in touch with their customers on a regular basis at low cost. As opined by Merisavo (2004) customers appreciate regular communication via e-mail because it brings value and satisfaction to them by providing them with appropriate information and by decreasing their efforts to search for information. E-marketing is very vital in business today as it provides online and electronic opportunities, dissolves both domestic and international barriers; provide entrance to both customer and intending customers worldwide. Firms now use the e-mails which aid their marketing campaigns making electronic marketing to grow rapidly. (Etuk, Awah & Akpan, 2022). E-marketing permits marketers to inform and communicate customers at a segment of the cost of a regular post office mail, and it is timely, targeted and significant (Etuk & Akpan, 2015). E-marketing offers audio and virtual messages, making it possible to capture the interest of consumers with mind captivating campaigns

Search Engine Optimization: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a digital marketing strategy and a widely used process for improving the volume and quality of customer traffic to a company website through search engines. Etuk & Akpan (2015) sees Search Engine Optimization as a form of digital marketing that seeks to promote websites by increasing their visibility in search engine result pages (SERPs). According to Khraim (2015), Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the method of designing, writing and coding a website in a way that aids to improve the quality, volume and visibility of business website by people using search engines through the natural or unpaid search results. It is always the main objective of businesses to strive harder in order to achieve higher rankings for their websites because as website appears at the beginning of any

search results list more regularly, the greater the likelihood that users will visit the site (Enge, Spencer, Stricchiola & Fishkin, 2012). The kind of value consumers derived from search engines are better matching, time saving and price transparency. For instance, in better matching it helps customer find information relevant to their needs while for time saving, it speeds up finding information that streamline decision making and purchasing. The work of search engine optimizer is to see to it that keywords and phrases are chosen carefully as these are the words with which a Web site is associated when a user enters words into a search engine (Etuk & Akpan, 2015).

Digital marketing and Business Growth

With the evolution of modern technologies, businesses have taken various steps to keep up with the changes. The traditional brick-and-mortar companies have gradually started moving on the road to online marketing while some have started working harder and devoting more in their marketing strategy by concentrating on digital marketing plans. The process of drawing online customers will define whether a business is thriving and successful or has failed. In the field of digital marketing, using various digital marketing tools and techniques, enables business owners to give a tough fight to competition and experience significant growth in their business. Any growing and forthcoming business can benefit from a strong online presence. An online presence offers companies a healthier opportunity to compete, sustain and grow. Digital marketing helps in making use of proven strategies and techniques that attract not necessarily more traffic but highly targeted traffic that delivers results. Targeting the right kind of people that delivers the kind of results is what digital marketing is all about, thus, ensuring business survival and growth.

Digital Marketing and the Customers

Digital marketing is fast growing to become the most popular marketing approaches used by companies specifically through social media platforms and emails. On top of their ease of use and business, social media marketing and email marketing have been found to be highly effective in building customer engagement, an element that determines an increase of customers' purchase intention. Generally, digital marketing tools provide customers with convenience and quick service, build a better relationship between customer and the company, provide 24/7 access, create personalized marketing experience for each member of customers, provide the customer with options and comparative shopping, provide clear product information and help keep the customers current.

The Concept of Customer's Patronage

A customer (sometimes known as a client, buyer, or purchaser) is the recipient of a good, product or idea, obtained from a seller, vendor or supplier for a monetary or other valuable consideration. A customer is the most important visitor on business premises; he is not dependent on business but the business is dependent on him. He is not an interruption in business work rather he is the purpose of it. Patronage on the other hand can be said to mean, the material helps and encouragement given by a patron, in this instance the patron is seen to be a customer in an

exchange transaction. Customer patronage denotes the degree to which buying units concentrate purchases over time to a particular brand based on positive strengthening and expressed via repetitive buying behaviour (Nyakweba, Wesonga & Bosire, 2015). Customer patronage also has to do with the processes that customers engage in when choosing a product among alternatives; as well as the factors and features used in the selection. Behaviourial scientists thus propose that customer patronage results from a trial that gets reinforced through satisfaction, and leads to repeat purchase; while cognitive psychologists contends that customer patronage builds through mental processes, based on the believe that consumers engage in extensive problem solving behavior involving services (Nyakweba *et al.*, 2015). Customer patronage important is essential to business sustainability in the fast food industry. Hence, marketers attempt to determine customers' preference with a view to adapt and generate value that stimulates customer patronage (Njite, Njoroge, Parsa, Parsa & VanderRest, 2015).

In a highly competitive industry, satisfying the customers should be the primary focus of firms that wish to sustain patronage (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Customer patronage is the approval or backing provided by customers with respect to a particular brand. Patronage conveys the foundation for an established and growing market share. Kotler (2007) opined that consumers have unpredictable degree of patronage to particular services, stores and other entities. Patronage arises when an individual displays conscious effort to choose a solution towards his or her need(s) through the process of analyzing situations which would be rewarding and relatively satisfying amidst certain challenges faced in the course of fulfilling his/her own desires (Adiele & Grend, 2016). This clarifies why individuals can exhibit unconditional attachment and affection towards objects (Adiele & Etuk, 2017). Oliver (1999) proposed that patronage is a continuum, beginning from some cognitive beliefs followed by emotional cognitive loyalty and lastly actual purchase behaviours. Gaining customer patronage is a vital objective of strategic marketing and relationship marketing creativities. Customers are more inclined in patronizing a business that goes an extra mile in marketing itself and its special treatments leave a positive impact on customers and keeps them returning to the business. Customers go through a process before buying an item. Understanding consumer behaviour and the processes they go through in making a purchase decision is vital for building customer patronage. Customer patronage provides the basis for a steady and increasing market share. According to Nizam (2015), the cost of winning customers is six times as much as to retain existing ones.

Customer patronage refers to the level of consent or support expressed in order to stir customer's display of repurchase or repeat intention and satisfaction towards using a product. The extent of patronage is inspired by customer's behaviourial, attitudinal and psychological commitment and willingness to sustain extra cost towards repurchasing a brand amidst other substitutes (Perutkova & Parsa, 2010). Ayodele (2016) reiterates that customer patronage is measured by the number of brands purchased, ratio of purchases and future purchase intention exhibited towards a brand even in the midst of change in quality and price. According to Kotler (2007), consumers have varying

degree of patronage to specific goods and services. Also, customer patronage inspires consumer loyalty and retention as well as help organizations in building their brand or products, growing their market share, prompt delivering services and create marketing improvement strategies. Similarly, Nyakweba & Wesonga (2015) suggest consumers are better grouped into four according to their patronage status:

1. Switchers – These are consumers who do not show any loyalty to any firm or service provider.
2. Shifting Patrons – These are consumers who shift from one firm or service provide to the other.
3. Split Patrons – These are consumer loyal to more than one firm or service provider.
4. Hard Core Patrons – Those who purchase products and services from a particular firm or service provider.

Firms that desire a sustained patronage in today's highly competitive business environment are required to have the satisfaction of their customer-ship as a key focus. The phenomenon of brand swapping makes customer patronage a topic of perennial concern to marketers; just as business survival in today's highly competitive business environment needs firms to win and keep the patronage of customers (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016). Babin & Darden(2016) suggest that values, lifestyles, social class and media habits are antecedent to patronage (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016), and affects store attribute importance; which may be evoked by a stimulus that sets needs in motion, leading to patronage intentions and patronage behaviour. Hence, the phenomenon of customer patronage requires on-going observation, since social, cultural and economic changes affect patronage behavior (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016). In line with this, the major measures of customer patronage are;

Patronage intention

Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) see consumers purchase intention as an important indicator for predicting consumer behavior. Patronage intention explains the tendency that the consumer will be willing to buy a given product in the future. Zeithaml (2008) observes that merchandize value discernment trigger purchase intentions and purchase behavior in organizations. Hence, purchase intention is found to be influenced by product value. Consumers' ambition to purchase can also be perceived as an association between their attitude towards a product and its precise purchase.

Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) gave three renowned measurement items for estimating purchase intentions: possible to buy, intended to buy and consider buying. Thus, service organizations such as fast food firms can enhance customers purchase behavior by generating value in product offerings to match consumers' expectations and moderate their requirements.

Actual patronage

Significantly, purchase action by a customer subsumes psychological principles that have been evolved to exploit an understanding of consumers' needs so that products can be designed, developed and communicated in a justified way that can mirror the applicable and substantial desires of consumers. Consumer decision making is a process comprised of five stages that people experience when deciding on what products to buy (Grewal & Levy, 2010). Conventionally, consumer decision making has been explained into five refined stages known as: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post purchase processes. All decision-making are channeled towards a determination of a purchase action. Accordingly, Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal & Glenn (2002) observed that consumers' choice impact shoppers' discernments of commodity value and consequently their aspiration to constitute a purchase act.

Repeat patronage

Repeat purchase defines customers' propensity to returns to a particular brand for more business after first trial (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016). It is the willingness of individuals to re-patronize a firm (Wirtz & Lwin, 2009). Repeat patronage is the positioning of a series of orders by customer from a distinct company; or the buying of a product by a customer of the same brand. Repeat purchase customers constitute customers who attach satisfied emotional, physical and intellectual connection to a company's offerings which exceeds their contemplations. Wirtz & Lwin (2009) suggest that repeat purchase is a measure of a consumer loyalty to a specific brand and that it is a principal goal companies strive to attain. Repeat patronage in buyer-seller relationships is made on trust, commitment and mutual respect; since customers' revisit companies based on their belief that the firm will do business in a manner that defends their interest (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016). Repeat patronage is thus covered by favorable purchase experience, meaning that consumers will continue to return to a firm for further business as long as they (the customers) get a satisfactory experience with the company (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016).

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty comes about when customers are satisfied which motivates them to continue patronage. For an organization to sustain long term success and reputation, customer loyalty has to come into play. From the earlier discussions customer loyalty has been linked to service quality and customer satisfaction; these two variables are in turn influenced by a lot of factors. The term customer loyalty can be used to describe the behavior of repeat customers, as well as those that offer good ratings, reviews, or testimonials. From this definition customer who constantly purchase a good or service can be termed as loyal as well customers who spread good information it. Additionally, Singh & Khan (2012) explained customer loyalty as the tendency of a customer to purchase a particular good or service in the midst of other brands. The ability of a company to draw and preserve new customers is usually not limited to the kind of products and services they provide but rather the kind of reputation it has in the market and the various ways it serves its existing customers. In their study, it was identified that customer loyalty has a positive influence

on profit margin and also eventually it earns the company a good reputation. Al-Rousan, Ramzi & Mohamed (2010) advocated that, there are certain dimensions of service quality that are directly correlated with customer loyalty and they include tangibility, responsiveness, reliability and empathy. The study went further to put much more emphasis on tangibility as the most important factor increasing customer loyalty. The implication is that any improvements made to increase service quality will spontaneously lead to an increase in the customer loyalty.

Relationship between Digital Marketing and Customer Patronage

Over the years, digital marketing has evolved in Nigeria According to Africa Internet Usage and Population Statistics internet penetration in Nigeria is now 28.9% at estimated 43,982,200 users and as a result, owing to the huge marketing potentials inherent in digital media as a part of the overall marketing mix, coupled with the increasing use of the internet by Nigerians, brands are looking for hire agencies (tra-digital agency) with in-depth knowledge of the digital marketing and how to use them to exploit media spend. With change in time, technology has developed rapidly as well. With the assistance of internet, one can get a favorite product within few clicks of a mouse. One can buy computers, mobile phones, batteries, memory cards, pen drives, earphones, headphones, among others. In the past, marketing was all about revealing leads to as many messages as possible until they decided to buy something. Now, businesses cannot just shout at their customers and hope for the best, they need to form relationships with their prospects through content marketing, social media and public relations among others.

Mobile searches have exceeded desktop searches, the world has become increasingly digital and influencers have risen to the top as the ultimate way of gaining customer patronage, what all this information shows us is that consumer behaviour has changed. Companies can either keep up with the trends in acquisition and choice or they run the risk of becoming obsolete. A great way to increase customer patronage is by marketing and branding your product using various digital marketing tools. Post regular content that is targeted, well-researched and engaging. This will give an existing customer a reason to keep coming back to your products. The only way one can truly remain competitive and ensure that your customers remain loyal to your brand is to deliver the very best service you can, keep a constant eye on your competitors and research into the latest customer service and marketing trends. Being proactive in the digital sphere increases ones longevity and customer awareness.

An Overview of Digital Marketing in Nigeria

The emergence of the Internet on the shores of human communities has affected and still changing the way information are accessed thereby bringing about new communication culture. One of the new ways of creating a shared meaning engendered by the Internet is through digital marketing also known as e-commerce. Regardless of the size, a number of businesses nowadays are embracing digital marketing. Tokunbo (2017) opined that it is no longer news that there has been a phenomenal upsurge in the amount of internet users in Nigeria. In the same vein, the number of

online financial transactions has basically increased over the years. Similarly, Tokunbo (2017) opined that businesses in the country have taken their means of communicating and trading with their consumers to the online space.

Digital marketing is the use of Internet for the selling, buying and delivery of goods and services. Through this, the country has revolutionized the mode of business transactions by providing customers with the ability to invest, distribute, explore and purchase anytime and anywhere access to the internet is available. Despite the emerging growth of e-commerce world over, less than the expected population in Nigeria are lagging behind in its adoption. Tokunbo (2017) explained that what this means is that there is still a advance expectancy as regards the digital marketing in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the increase in online marketing would be sporadic and much healthier, but this has stalled because of the reluctance of Nigerians to embrace the online community as a result of trust. The reason according to them include high level of illiteracy, no express legislation that deals with e-commerce and high levels of internet scams among others.

It is tragic to note that e-commerce is constantly growing in Nigeria with no highly structured legal and supervisory framework at the moment. Tokunbo (2017) posit that in Nigeria, significant efforts on the regulation of e-commerce related actions are still at the stage of Draft Bills before the National Assembly. He identified the Nigerian bill on Cyber Crimes and the Electronic Transaction Bill which is exhibited on the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), as an example. The draft bill on Cyber Crimes when endorsed will provide the legal and institutional base for combating cybercrime in Nigeria and ensuring cyber security. Suffice to say that the governments of New Zealand and Britain have taken the initiative to establish practice that would ensure fair business practices, customer dispute resolution processes among others (Tokunbo, 2017). The Nigerian government can toe this line to properly deal with the challenges facing e-commerce. Albeit, the more daunting work of enforcement of codes and standards would need to be pursued with all vigour. The whole world is trusting more on the internet presently than ever before, and the swiftness at which it has influenced commercial dealings in Nigeria beginning from banking and telecommunications cannot be overstressed.

Digital Marketing and the Fast Food Industry

We have entered the era where that digital world has definitely taken over every aspect of our lives. We cannot spend even an hour without any kind of contact with the digital world. It won't be exaggeration to term ourselves as the digital generation and as such running a business in today's world is not as easy as it used to be due to the increased competitiveness. The fast food industry is unquestionably one of the most competitive ones and it faces a lot of challenges to make its business look unique and attract greater customers. To create a creative fast food restaurant, certain tools need to be put in place and properly used. One of the best tools to approach and attract customers is digital marketing and this is even supported by the statistics where 75%

of the customers assess fast food information through their portable smart devices while 33% also look for online menus.

Employing digital marketing techniques for your fast food is effective for maintain the identity and credibility of your brand which will definitely attract customers. It gives room for instant feedback and reviews about the business. Posting photos of the best dishes on your menu and arousing the customer's appetite and making them crave for your food and end up at your restaurant. Digital marketing is an easy way to post about different offers and promotions that is available thereby getting maximum benefit out of it.

To get the full attention of your customers using digital marketing, the following should be put in place;

1. Perfect your website,
2. Focus on search engine optimization by creating blog,
3. Gain followers on social media,
4. Use influencer marketing,
5. Implement email marketing,
6. Take advantage of online reviews,
7. Keep online engagement high and;
8. Network with other local businesses

Customer Patronage in Fast Food Industries

With the effect of globalization, fast food industries have increasingly become popular in Nigeria and have also increased in their numbers. So have consumers improved in their numbers, taste and preference. What determines a customer's choice of patronizing a fast food restaurant differs from nation to nation and from state to state as a result of cultural, environmental socioeconomic and technological specifics. Customers have diverse motivation, tastes and preference and these are the things that determine the patronage in fast food restaurants. It is therefore imperative to identify the determinant factors of patronage. It is very essential for banks to investigate into these determinants in order to find appropriate marketing techniques that can entice potential ones as well as retain the current ones. There has been a growing competition among fast food restaurants as the services offered are mostly similar. Consequently, they are required to identify dynamics customers consider to make a choice among different providers.

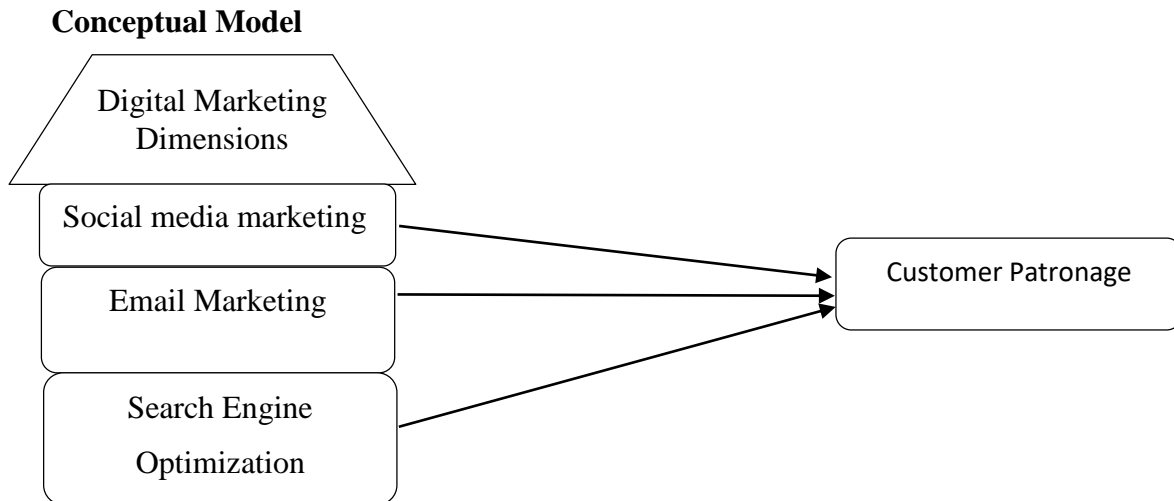


Figure 2.1: Digital Marketing Dimensions and Customer Patronage Model

Source: Researcher's Conceptualization, (2023)

Based on the research objectives, the conceptual model was constructed. This model was developed showing digital marketing dimensions to include social media marketing, email marketing and search engine optimization as key underpinning towards customer's patronage. This model is important because it consists of variables that can be controlled by the fast food operators in Akwa Ibom State to increase effective patronage from their customers.

Theoretical Review

Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975)

The theory of reasoned action (TRA) was propounded by Fishbein, M.A and Ajzen, I. in 1975. The theory states that a person's behaviour is determined by its behavioral intention to perform it. This intention is itself dependent on the person's attitudes and his subjective norms towards the behavior. Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) define the subjective norms as the person's perception that most people who are important to him think he should or should not perform the behaviour in question Fishbein & Ajzen, (1975). This theory can be summarized by the following equation: Behavioral Intention = Attitude + Subjective norms.

The theory describes the links between beliefs, attitudes, norms, intentions, and behaviors of persons. The theory was born largely out of frustration with traditional attitude-behaviour research, much of which found weak correlations between attitude measures and performance of volitional behaviours (Hale, Householder & Greene, 2002). The theory of reasoned action is a

model for the prediction of behavioral intention, spanning predictions of attitude and predictions of behaviour. According to the theory, behaviour is determined by the behavioural intention to emit the behaviour. There are two main factors that determine behavioural intentions: an individual or "attitudinal" factor and a social or "normative" factor. In accordance with an expectancy-value formulation, the first factor (the person's attitude toward a specific behaviour) is suggested to be a function of the noticeable (behavioural) beliefs about the perceived consequences of performing the behaviour and the person's (outcome) evaluation of these penalties. The second element, subjective norms, comprises of an actor's perceptions of what significant specific referent individuals or groups think he or she should do. Subjective norms are a function of the person's (normative) beliefs concerning what each referent thinks he or she should do and the motivation to conform with these referents. The relative significance of the attitudinal and normative components in determining intention is expected to differ according to the behaviour, the situation, and individual differences of the actor (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The theory of reasoned action has received substantial and, for the most part, justifiable attention within the area of consumer behaviour not only does the model appear to predict consumer intentions and behaviour quite well, it also offers a relatively simple basis for identifying where and how to target consumers' behavioural change attempts (Sheppard, Hartwick & Warshaw, 1988).

Empirical Review

Eke (2022) studied the influence of online marketing on marketing performance of small and medium scale businesses in Akwa Ibom State Nigeria. The core objective of this study was to determine the relationship between online marketing and marketing performance of small and medium scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State. The sample consisted of 366 SMEs operators across the three senatorial districts in Akwa Ibom State. Survey research design was implemented by the researcher. Data were collected with the use of structured questionnaire. Two hypotheses were framed, tested and analyzed using the simple linear regression. It was revealed that there is significant relationship between the two variables of online marketing and marketing performance of SMEs in Akwa Ibom State. The researchers concluded that e-mail marketing and search engine marketing does improve marketing performance of MSMEs in Akwa Ibom State. The researcher recommended that SMEs that have not been using these proxies should do so in order to enhance their performance.

Anyadighibe, Etim, Etuk, Kajang & Ekom (2021) studied the effect of outdoor advertising on customer patronage of telecommunication data bundles. The researchers used cross sectional survey research design was adopted and primary data were collected from 232 subscribers of telecommunication in Nigeria using structured questionnaire. The data acquired was analyzed using simple linear regression. Findings revealed that billboard, point-of-sale and lamp post advertising had weighty effect on customers' patronage of telecommunication data bundles. The researchers recommended that outdoor advertisement should be used by telecommunication firms

in creating awareness and increasing customers' patronage of data bundles particularly in a society where there is unpredictable power supply and inability of subscribers to have access to television and/or radio, print media.

Etuk, Udoh, and Eke (2021) conducted a study on electronic marketing and marketing performance of small and medium scale enterprises in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The key objective of the study was to unravel the relationship between electronic marketing and marketing performance of SMEs in Akwa Ibom State. The researchers embraced survey design. Data were collected with the use of structured questionnaire. The sample size comprised of 366 SMEs operators nominated using simple random sampling. Two hypotheses were articulated, tested and analyzed using simple linear regression. It was established that there is significant relationship between the dimensions of electronic and marketing performance of SMEs in Akwa Ibom State. In line with the findings, the researchers concluded that social media marketing and SMS marketing are key basics of electronic marketing which boost the marketing performance of SMEs in Akwa Ibom State. The researchers further recommended that SMEs that have not been using electronic marketing strategies (social media marketing and SMS marketing) to a large extent should do so in order to be competitive.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The survey research design was adopted for the study. This method was chosen by the researcher in order to have the opportunity to describe systematically, the facts, qualities and characteristics of the given population as factual and accurately as possible.

Population of the Study

The population of the study was made up of the customers of sixty-four (64) registered fast-food industries operating in Akwa Ibom State (Akwa Ibom State Tourism Board, 2023). These fast-food industries were selected based on their years of operations and brand recognition from the consumers.

Sample Size /Sampling Technique

The sample size of the study was drawn from the total population of sixty-four (64) registered fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State. Twelve (12) registered fast food restaurants was drawn from the population size of sixty-four restaurants using quota sampling techniques. Three (3) fast food industries each was selected from across the four major cities (Eket, Ikot Ekpene, Oron and Uyo) in Akwa Ibom State. Quota sampling was also used to select a sample of three hundred and eighty four (384) respondents i.e. twenty (32) respondents from each selected fast food restaurant that visited the eateries during the period of data collection for this study. The aim of using quota sample was to enable the researcher reduce bias in sample selection from the population of the

study. However, in administering the questionnaire to each of the twenty (32) respondents from the selected fast food restaurants that visited the eateries during the period of data collection for this study, a simple random sampling technique was used so as to avail all the classes, ages and sex the opportunity of been selected for the study.

Table 3.1 List of Selected Fast Food Restaurants in Eket, Ikot Ekpene, Oron and Uyo Cities

S/N	Names of Fast Food Restaurants in Eket, Ikot Ekpene, Oron and Uyo	Location (Cities)
1.	Oliver Tweets Restaurants	Eket
2.	Eriqsmacks Restaurants	Eket
3.	Kilimanjaro Restaurants	Eket
4.	Tinnapa Bar	Ikot Ekpene
5.	Sicilian Lounge	Ikot Ekpene
6.	De-Cherish Fast Food Resturant	Ikot Ekpene
7.	Turkish Fast Food	Oron
8.	Genesis Restaurants	Oron
9.	Lounge N Garden	Oron
10.	Kilimanjaro Restaurants	Uyo
11.	D-Choice Fast Food/Eateries	Uyo
12.	Chicken Republic	Uyo

Source: Researcher' Compilation, (2023)

Sources and Nature of Data

Data for this research was collected from primary sources. This is because the researcher adopted the survey research design for the study. The primary data were obtained with the use of questionnaire, designed to enable respondents express their independent opinions. The data was collected from customers of selected fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State. The secondary data were collected from the company's annual reports, newsletters, official diaries, brochures, textbooks and academic journals.

Design and Administration of Research Instrument

The questionnaire copies were distributed to 384 customers of selected fast food restaurants in the four major cities (Eket, Ikot Ekpene, Oron and Uyo) of Akwa Ibom State. The survey instrument contained items designed to elicit information relating to the interplay of digital marketing dimensions on customer's patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State. The data collecting questionnaire was a close-ended questionnaire where the researcher gave the respondents options from where they can choose opinions that best describe their views, opinions, attitudes or behaviours. The researcher also adopted a Five-Point Likert scale for the questionnaire which was rated as follows:

Strongly Agreed (SA)	=4
Agreed (A)	=3
Disagreed (D)	=2
Strongly Disagreed (SD)	=1
Undecided (UD)	=0

Theoretical Specification of Models

The statistical tool adopted for this study was the simple linear regression model. In this case, the measurement and the *apriori* expectation for each of the independent variables on the dependent variable were presented on Table 3.2

Table 3.2: Variable Description

S/N	Variable	Abbr.	Measurement	<i>Apriori</i> Expectation
1.	Customer Patronage	CuP	Five-Point Likert Scale	
2.	Social Media Marketing	SMM	Five-Point Likert Scale	Positive
3.	Email Marketing	EM	Five-Point Likert Scale	Positive
4.	Search Engine Optimization	SEO	Five-Point Likert Scale	Positive

Source: *Researcher's Compilation, (2023)*

Empirical Specification of Model

The model for the study and all the variables are stated below:

The dependent variable was: Customer Patronage (CuP) while the independent variables are: Social Media Marketing (SMM), Email Marketing (EM) and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) as stated in the model below:

$$\text{CuP} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{SMM} + \beta_2 \text{EM} + \beta_3 \text{SEO} + e_t \quad \text{Equation (3.1),}$$

where: β_0 = Intercept of CuP; β_1 , β_2 , β_3 and β_4 = Coefficient of each of the independent variables; e_t = Random error terms.

Method of Data Analysis

The questionnaire was edited for consistency and completeness, data were analyzed and explained to suit the objectives. The simple percentage, descriptive statistic and simple linear regression model were used to analyze the data collected and test the hypotheses stated. The level of significance was 5%.

Decision Rule

The decision of accepting or rejecting the null hypotheses (H_0) of the statistical test was based on 95% confidence interval as stated below:

- i. Accept the null hypothesis if the P value is more than 5% (0.05) level of significance, OR
 ii. Reject the null hypothesis if P value is at or less than the 5% (0.05) level of significance.
 iii.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Data Presentation

The questionnaire respondent's rate reveals that out of the 384 copies of questionnaire distributed, only 361 copies constituting 97.99% were retrieved in useable form. The 361 copies of the questionnaire constituted the workable sample for this research work. While the remaining 23 copies constituting 2.01% were not properly filled. Hence, were excluded from analysis. The responses were analyzed using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 23).

Test of Hypotheses

Test of Hypothesis One

H₀₁: Social Media Marketing has no significant effect on Customer Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.881 ^a	.776	.775	1.48172

a. Predictors: (Constant), Social Media Marketing

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2806.592	1	2806.592	1278.335	.000 ^b
	Residual	810.141	359	2.196		
	Total	3616.733	360			

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Patronage

b. Predictors: (Constant), Social Media Marketing

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	29.425	.381		77.201	.000
	Social media marketing	.687	.019	-.881	-35.754	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Patronage

The table above with R value of 0.881 indicates that there is a significant effect between the dependent and the independent variables. The R-Square value of 0.776 implies that about 77.6% of the variation in customer patronage was explained by social media marketing. The F-calculated value of 1278.335 and P-value of 0.000 implies that the model was adequate. That is, the independent variable was able to explain the dependent variable very well. The constant value of 29.425 indicates that keeping independent variable (social media marketing) constant; customer patronage will remain at 29.425. The coefficient of social media marketing was 0.687 which means that a unit change in social media marketing will lead to 0.687 unit change in customer patronage. The P-value of 0.000 means that the effect of social media marketing on customer patronage was statistically significant.

Test of Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: Email marketing has no significant effect on Customer Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.876 ^a	.767	.766	1.51098

a. Predictors: (Constant), Email marketing

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2774.286	1	2774.286	1215.164	.000 ^b
	Residual	842.447	359	2.283		
	Total	3616.733	360			

A. Dependent Variable: Customer Patronage

B. Predictors: (Constant), Email Marketing

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	29.408	.390		75.336	.000
	Email marketing	.694	.020	-.876	-34.859	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Patronage

The table above with R value of 0.876 indicates that there is a significant effect between the dependent and the independent variables. The R-Square value of 0.767 implies that about 76.7% of the variation in customer patronage was explained by email marketing. The F-calculated value of 1215.164 and P-value of 0.000 implies that the model was adequate. That is, the independent

variable was able to explain the dependent variable very well. The constant value of 29.408 indicates that keeping independent variable (Email marketing) constant; customer patronage will remain at 29.408. The coefficient of Email marketing was 0.694 which means that a unit change in Email marketing will lead to 0.694 unit change in customer patronage. The P-value of 0.000 means that the influence of Email marketing on customer patronage was statistically significant.

Test of Hypothesis Three

H03: Search Engine Optimization has no significant effect on Customer Patronage of fast food industries in Akwa Ibom State.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.864 ^a	.747	.747	1.57393

a. Predictors: (Constant), Search Engine Optimization

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2702.623	1	2702.623	1090.972	.000 ^b
	Residual	914.110	359	2.477		
	Total	3616.733	360			

A. Dependent Variable: Customer Patronage

B. Predictors: (Constant), Search Engine Optimization

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	29.491	.414		71.196	.000
	Search engine optimization	.688	.021	-.864	-33.030	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Patronage

The table above with R value of 0.864 indicates that there is a significant effect between the dependent and the independent variables. The R-Square value of 0.747 implies that about 74.7% of the variation in customer patronage was explained by Email marketing. The F-calculated value of 1090.972 and P-value of 0.000 implies that the model was adequate. That is, the independent variable was able to explain the dependent variable very well. The constant value of 29.491 indicates that keeping independent variable (search engine optimization) constant; customer

patronage will remain at 29.491. The coefficient of search engine optimization was 0.688 which means that a unit change in search engine optimization will lead to 0.688 unit change in customer patronage. The P-value of 0.000 means that the effect of search engine optimization on customer patronage was statistically significant.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings of the study revealed a significant effect between each of the three dimensions of digital marketing (social media, email marketing and search engine optimization) and customer patronage of fast food in Akwa Ibom state. The result of the first hypothesis shows that social media marketing influences customer patronage of fast food in Akwa Ibom State with a regression coefficient of 0.687. This result is in agreement with that of Etuk, *et al* (2021) who established that social media is a core driver of marketing performance. The result of the second hypothesis also reveals a regression coefficient of 0.694 which denotes that there is a strong positive relationship between email marketing and customer patronage in Akwa Ibom State. This result is also tandem with that of Etuk, *et al* (2021) who found out that there is a positive relationship between email marketing and marketing performance. The third hypothesis reveals a regression coefficient of 0.688 which denotes that there is a strong positive relationship between search engine optimization and customer patronage of fast food in Akwa Ibom State. This result is in tandem with that of Eke (2022) who found that there is a relationship between search engine and performance of SMEs in Akwa Ibom State.

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings of the study, it is obvious that engaging in digital marketing dimensions can increase customer patronage at any point in time. The empirical results of the study clearly underline the following:

Social media, emails and search engine optimization marketing are all key dimensions of digital marketing which lead to increase in customer's patronage of fast food product. These digital marketing elements offer vendors the potential to reach more customers, steadily link the products and brands with their customers, enhance their sales volume and guide them on how to increase their products with reference to customers' feedback, moderate increased competition, and build avenue to access new markets.

This study has also discovered that those fast food channels in Akwa Ibom State who are intense in adopting digital marketing and assimilating it into their company strategies, have attained more patronage than others.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researchers made the following recommendations:

- i. Marketing campaign should be emphasized on social media platforms since the age group in those platforms constitutes the people with interest in patronizing fast food product.
- ii. Management of fast food vendor should pay more attention to sending mails to customers on their new offerings, birthday wishes and business updates.
- iii. Management should place adverts on popular search engines so as to go global.

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