

The Influence of WhatsApp Influencer Marketing on SMEs in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the influence of Whatsapp influencer marketing on SMEs in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The study had four objectives, amongst which are: to analyze the effectiveness of WhatsApp influencer marketing in promoting SMEs, and to examine the types of content used by influencers on WhatsApp and their impact on consumer engagement with SMEs. Adopting the survey research design, the study was anchored on three theories: the two step flow theory, social exchange theory and the uses and gratification theory. From a population of

Through a survey conducted with 60 participants, the study highlights the critical role of WhatsApp influencers in creating awareness, building targeted audiences, and fostering credibility for SMEs. The findings revealed that leveraging WhatsApp as a marketing tool significantly contributes to increased sales and improved brand recognition for businesses in the university community. Additionally, the research underscored the cost-effectiveness of WhatsApp influencer marketing compared to other social media campaigns and traditional marketing methods. This research project provided valuable insights into how SMEs can optimize WhatsApp influencer strategies to enhance their market presence and achieve sustainable growth.

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people were forced to interact virtually with people more than they would normally. Chatting, meetings, services, tutorials, etc., were no longer done physically but online. The world felt the need to continue life normally, even though there were restrictions on physical meetings at that time, and to achieve this, social media became an indispensable tool. Of all social media platforms, WhatsApp (a pun on the phrase “what’s up”), with 1.5 billion monthly active users around the world, pride itself as the leading social media platform in most parts of the world (Mazereeuw, 2018); almost, the only method of communication in some place (Hutchinson, 2020). This is because WhatsApp, which was invented in 2009 was meant to be a social networking platform where people send and receive messages instantly to complement the conventional short message service (SMS) (Mazereeuw, 2018; Dove, 2020).

According to Kanter (2020), WhatsApp had seen a 40% increase in usage; in the early phase of the pandemic, usage increased to 27%, in the mid-phase 41% and countries in the late phase of the pandemic saw an increase of 51%. Spain experienced a 76% increase in time spent on WhatsApp. According to WhatsApp (2020), WhatsApp helped people connect with those that mattered most to them during the pandemic; it provided ways for users to check up on their friends and family, get updates on the latest official health information, and disseminate information responsibly (Cheney, 2020; Hutchinson, 2020).

Businesses weren’t left out of this improvement. As conventional forms of advertisement and marketing (which mostly involved physical involvement) seemed obsolete in the now-digital ecosystem; online forms of marketing had to be integrated into the business world. As a matter of fact, at the breakout of the coronavirus, WhatsApp users who are entrepreneurs, start-ups, and managers of medium enterprise started using WhatsApp aggressively to promote their business in the bid to maintain their customers; the customers who could no longer visit physical business premises due to the lockdown (Anand, 2014; Singh, 2019; Negedu & Isik, 2020; Antler Team, 2020). WhatsApp advertising became the buzz of the advertising trend among social media platforms during the pandemic (Lin, 2020; Hillier, 2020; Neifield, 2010).

Social media made it easier for businesses to interact with their customers in a situation where physical interaction wasn’t much of an option. Using apps like Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, businesses can easily reach out to customers and communicate with them, ensuring the progress of the business as communication plays a vital role in the growth of a business.

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Social media has become a storefront for most brands, especially Instagram and TikTok which are visual based apps. WhatsApp, which is mainly a text-based app, focuses more on interaction between two parties. Thus, communication between businesses and customers/clients happens mainly on WhatsApp.

It can be argued that of all social media apps, WhatsApp is probably the most close-knit. Therefore, coming to that level to interact with prospective business audiences makes it feel like home. Due to WhatsApp's primary qualities which include; text, voice, video messaging, group chats, and broadcast messaging, audiences could be met with prompter responses and on-demand information if needed, especially with the availability of auto-responses to certain keywords, on the WhatsApp business model, this feature can be used to answer frequently asked questions (FAQs). This revelation is the aim of this study. In a typical student environment, businesses aim to improve students' standard of living as school can be very hectic.

Statement of Problem

A university environment involves the cycling of students (continuous admission and graduation). Therefore, to run a thriving business in such a limited environment, gathering a large audience of prospective customers/clients becomes imperative. This is where WhatsApp influencer marketing (WIM) comes in. Globally, marketing strategies are important tools for small and medium enterprise (SME) owners to survive and grow in competitive environments. Also, marketing strategies represent a pattern of resource allocation decisions made throughout an organization by business owners (Mustapha, 2017). If a business owner does not know the right marketing techniques or strategies to apply at every given moment or season, it can be catastrophic for the business. Sadly, not all SMEs are opportune to know what to do as regards marketing. During the coronavirus pandemic, a lot of entrepreneurs, SMEs, and business owners used WhatsApp as a marketing tool to help maintain and increase sales, which is limited to the contact list of the business owners. This flaw is a challenge to how effectively WhatsApp can be used as a marketing tool (Kierian et al., 2021).

The digital marketing landscape is rapidly increasing, causing businesses to leverage the influence of social media personalities to promote their brands (Obahiagbon et al., 2023) leading to a great deal of competition among business owners. This chaos can cause business owners to get lost whilst trying to make marketing decisions, marketing activities, and manage strategies (Adobor, 2020). SMEs contribute generously to the employment margins of the country, which in turn affects the economy positively, therefore a rise in the sales of SMEs yields a positive impact on the country and vice versa. Statistically, over 90% of Nigeria's employment and 49.78% of GDP come from SMEs (PwC, 2020)

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

This research aims to focus on the role and impact of WhatsApp influencer marketing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The specific objectives are:

1. analyze the effectiveness of WhatsApp influencer marketing in promoting SMEs.
2. examine the types of content used by influencers on WhatsApp and their impact on consumer engagement with SMEs.
3. assess the influence of WhatsApp influencer marketing on brand awareness and sales growth of SMEs.
4. identify the challenges and limitations faced by SMEs in implementing WhatsApp influencer marketing strategies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How effective is WhatsApp influencing marketing in promoting the products and services of SMEs?
2. What types of content do influencers use on WhatsApp, and how do they affect consumer engagement with SMEs?
3. What is the impact of WhatsApp influencer marketing on the brand awareness and sales growth of SMEs?
4. What challenges and limitations do SMEs face when implementing WhatsApp influencer marketing strategies?

Significance of Study

This study contributes empirical evidence and theoretical insights to the relatively underexplored academic topic of WhatsApp influencer marketing, particularly in the SME setting, laying the groundwork for future research. The findings will aid influencers and digital marketers by providing a better understanding of how to effectively engage with their audience on WhatsApp, allowing them to create more captivating content and strategies. Additionally, the study can help policymakers and industry regulators understand the changing digital marketing landscape, assisting in the establishment of rules and frameworks that promote ethical and effective marketing activities for SMEs. Finally, the practical implications of this research can directly inform company development methods, allowing SMEs to fine-tune their marketing strategies, increase consumer engagement, and ultimately improve business success. Overall, the value of this study stems from its ability to provide actionable insights and practical recommendations to assist SMEs succeed in a digital-first environment while also contributing to a greater understanding of digital marketing dynamics.

Scope

This study focuses on the impact of WhatsApp influencer marketing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The following key dimensions define the scope of the study: Geographical focus - this research will be focused on SMEs within Nigeria majorly

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those within school environments, because that is where a lot of young people thrive. The University of Nigeria will serve as its primary case study and would spread across to other states to get a broader view of the study. Industry and sector coverage - to have an in-depth analysis of the effects of WhatsApp influencer marketing, it would encompass a variety of industries and sectors that are prevalent within SMEs including; retail, fashion, food and beverage, technology, and services. Covering all these sectors shows the different ways the study affects all these businesses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WhatsApp as a Marketing Tool

In January 2018, WhatsApp introduced a business model of the messaging app known as WhatsApp Business, designed to facilitate communication between businesses and their clients on WhatsApp (Armstrong, 2019). Over time, Meta (the app's parent company) integrated options for WhatsApp users to expand their audience to other Meta-owned platforms like Instagram and Facebook through their WhatsApp status. This expansion allowed for a broader reach among WhatsApp users, including influencers and business owners, enabling them to promote their businesses and grow their audience more effectively. As of April 24, 2014, WhatsApp had over 500 million monthly active users, with 700 million photos and 100 million videos being shared daily, and the messaging system handling more than 10 billion messages each day (The Indian Express, 2014; Looper, 2014). Currently, WhatsApp boasts over 2 billion active monthly users worldwide.

WhatsApp as a Communication Tool

WhatsApp is exceptional in engaging customers and building loyalty because it allows for one-on-one communication between the influencer or brand and their audience. Messages on WhatsApp have a 95% open rate, making users more likely to react to a message sent via WhatsApp than any other app. This is because WhatsApp communication feels more authentic due to its conversational nature. In the digital marketing world, brands and businesses increasingly seek intimate and direct relationships with their customers to better understand their needs and how to meet them. This is where conversational marketing comes into play. Conversational marketing is defined as marketing anchored in direct and personal communication between customers and businesses through a personalized service experience across different platforms. This approach allows customers to feel like an integral part of the organizational process (Moguluwa et al., 2022).

The Emergence and Growth of WhatsApp Influencer Marketing

Notably, the digital advertising space has witnessed numerous developments over the years as advertisers have been striving to harness the potential of technology for establishing meaningful connections with consumers. It is increasingly being acknowledged that the digital age offers businesses the opportunity to drive targeted marketing. Rising social media usage has paved the way for the emergence of influencer marketing as an integral component of the digital media bundle, with a growing number of social media users leveraging their popularity to curate content in various fields, including lifestyle, fashion, beauty, fitness, parenting, and consumption (Oraedu et al.2021). Marketing strategies involving these individuals are seen as an effective way of making connections with the target audience (Usta, 2023). As individuals that are experts in their respective industries and persons who possess a highly influential presence over their followers, influencers can be effective in turning trends and sales, making them important facilitators for businesses. (Bellaaj, 2023)

The Role of Influencers in WhatsApp Marketing

Influencers on WhatsApp leverage their established relationships and trust within their personal networks to promote products and services. Unlike traditional influencers on Instagram or YouTube, WhatsApp influencers operate within close-knit communities where recommendations feel more personal and authentic (Sotikare, 2023). The informal nature of WhatsApp enables influencers to engage audiences through conversational marketing, making endorsements appear trustworthy. These are some of the role influencers play in WhatsApp marketing: **Personalization and Trust Building**

Influencers on WhatsApp often have close-knit communities, enabling them to engage audiences in a personal and informal manner. Unlike platforms such as Instagram or YouTube, WhatsApp interactions occur in more private, trust-driven settings like group chats or status updates. Recommendations from influencers in this space feel like advice from a friend, which boosts credibility and drives consumer action (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

High Engagement and Responsiveness

WhatsApp's direct messaging capabilities enable influencers to interact with their audience in real-time. Influencers use tools like group chats to foster discussions around products or services, allowing them to receive immediate feedback and build a community around their niche (Mazereeuw, 2018).

Micro-Targeting Through Community Building

WhatsApp influencers often establish communities centered around specific interests, such as fashion, fitness, or technology. These communities enable businesses to target highly relevant audiences, ensuring that marketing efforts are focused on consumers more likely to convert (Negedu & Isik, 2020).

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Amplification of Word-of-Mouth Marketing

Word-of-mouth marketing is a powerful strategy, and WhatsApp influencers excel at amplifying it. The informal nature of WhatsApp ensures that recommendations shared by influencers feel organic rather than forced. Consumers are more likely to trust and act upon such endorsements, particularly when the influencer has a reputation for honesty and reliability within their circle (Sotikare, 2023).

Content Creation and Sharing

Influencers use WhatsApp's features creatively to engage their audiences. For instance, they may use status updates to post product reviews, short tutorials, or exclusive offers. Additionally, WhatsApp's multimedia capabilities—such as sharing videos, images, and voice notes—allow influencers to diversify their content delivery methods, catering to different audience preferences (Makinde, 2023).

Integration with E-Commerce

With WhatsApp Business, influencers have additional tools to facilitate sales. Catalog features allow influencers to showcase products, while labels help track customer interactions. By integrating with Facebook and Instagram, influencers can run cohesive campaigns that drive traffic back to WhatsApp for personalized interactions and higher conversions (Potor, 2022).

Role in Campaign Analytics

Although WhatsApp lacks detailed native analytics, influencers often provide qualitative feedback from their audience. This feedback, combined with tracking tools like unique referral links, helps businesses measure the effectiveness of influencer-driven campaigns, albeit less granularly than on platforms like Instagram.

Influencer Marketing

Influence is classified as "a force one person (the agent) exerts on someone else (the target) to induce a change in the target, including changes in behaviors, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs and values" or "the ability to affect the behavior of others in a particular direction." (Barrett 2007). The 'force' here refers to tactics and strategies used to change the behavior or attitude of a person towards something. These tactics could involve personal appeal, inspirational appeal, consultation, ingratiation and rational appeal. This kind of tactic appeals to the mind, compelling them to see why what is being proposed is beneficial to them so that they decide to accept this decision on their own. Kotler et al. (2001) define 'word-of-mouth influence' as a form of personal communication about a product that reaches buyers through channels not directly controlled by the company. Such channels are independent experts, consumer advocates, consumer buying guides or personal acquaintances like neighbors, friends, or family members. In influencer marketing, these channels are social media platforms where consumers inform their opinions and purchase decisions by following fellow consumers or internet personalities. Additionally, paid influencer posts must be marked as advertising by the posting influencer so that users can fully identify paid from voluntary (genuine) endorsements. (Bakker 2018).

Consumers are generally aware that influencer marketing is a form of paid advertising (G+J, 2017). However, factors like credibility and trust in the influencer remain crucial for them. When influencer content appears too much like traditional advertising, consumers have become adept at ignoring or skipping these posts (Wakabayashi, 2018).

An influencer who can combine strong qualitative traits with impressive quantitative performance is more likely to achieve successful outcomes for brand partnerships. In other words, the qualitative and quantitative qualities of influencers together form the basis for effective influencer marketing. Balancing these qualities ensures a higher likelihood of success in driving consumer behavior, making influencer marketing a powerful tool in today's digital landscape.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in the socio-economic development of Nigeria, acting as the backbone of the economy by creating employment opportunities, fostering innovation, and contributing to GDP growth. They contribute significantly to the non-oil sector, playing a pivotal role in poverty alleviation and sustainable development. Despite their potential, SMEs in Nigeria face several challenges that hinder their growth and development. WTC Abuja, 2023 says that Small Medium scale businesses can be any enterprise employing between five and one hundred workers with an annual turnover of about four hundred thousand Naira (N400,000). The Federal Ministry of Commerce and Industry defines SMEs as firms with a total investment (excluding the cost of land but including capital) of up to N750,000 and paid employment of up to fifty (50) persons. Regardless, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), SMEs are enterprises with an asset base of less than ₦5 million, excluding land and buildings, employing between 10 to 199 people, and with an annual turnover not exceeding ₦100 million (SMEDAN, 2017). SMEs are typically characterized by low capital requirements, personalized management structures, and limited access to external financing. Onugu (2005), notes that 11 to 70 of these employees must be full-time staff.

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Contributions of SMEs to Economic Development

Employment Generation

SMEs are the largest employers in Nigeria, accounting for over 84% of the workforce (PwC, 2020). By providing employment opportunities to a significant portion of the population, including women and youth, SMEs contribute to reducing unemployment and alleviating poverty. Their labor-intensive nature ensures they absorb a large number of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, thus addressing skill mismatches prevalent in the Nigerian labor market (SMEDAN, 2020).

Moreover, in rural areas, SMEs act as primary sources of livelihood, reducing urban migration by providing local employment opportunities. This role is especially critical given Nigeria's rapidly growing population, projected to reach 400 million by 2050 (World Bank, 2022).

Contribution to GDP

SMEs contribute significantly to Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), accounting for approximately 48% of national output (PwC, 2020). Through their activities in manufacturing, agriculture, trade, and services, SMEs generate substantial economic value. Their ability to operate in diverse sectors ensures a broad-based contribution to the economy, promoting balanced and inclusive growth.

Promoting Regional and Rural Development

SMEs contribute to regional and rural development by decentralizing economic activities. Unlike large corporations that are often concentrated in urban centers, SMEs operate in rural and semi-urban areas, driving economic activities in these regions. For instance, agro-based SMEs in Nigeria have been instrumental in adding value to agricultural products, creating markets for local farmers, and reducing post-harvest losses. These activities strengthen rural economies and contribute to food security (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, 2021).

Fostering Innovation and Entrepreneurship

SMEs serve as hubs of innovation and entrepreneurship, particularly in technology and digital services. With limited resources, SMEs often adopt innovative approaches to solve problems, introduce new products, and improve service delivery. Kierian et al. (2021) highlighted that Nigerian SMEs are increasingly leveraging digital tools like WhatsApp and Facebook to enhance their marketing strategies and customer engagement. Additionally, SMEs provide a platform for budding entrepreneurs to test and refine their ideas, contributing to a culture of innovation. This entrepreneurial dynamism is essential for industrialization and long-term economic development.

Challenges Facing SMEs in Nigeria

Limited Access to Finance

Access to capital remains a major barrier for SMEs. According to SMEDAN (2020), over 70% of Nigerian SMEs struggle to obtain credit due to stringent collateral requirements and high-interest rates. SMEs often lack adequate financial literacy, which limits their ability to secure funding. Consequently, they rely on personal savings, informal lending channels, or financial support from friends and family.

Inadequate Infrastructure

Poor infrastructure, including unreliable power supply and inadequate transportation networks, significantly increases the cost of doing business and reduces competitiveness (PwC, 2020). For service-based SMEs, challenges such as poor internet connectivity and irregular network services hinder smooth transactions, while product-based SMEs face burdensome issues such as bad road networks and constant fuel price hikes.

Regulatory Bottlenecks

Complex registration processes and multiple taxation requirements create additional burdens for SMEs, discouraging formalization and growth (Negedu & Isik, 2020). Other significant barriers include overbearing bureaucratic processes, inconsistent policies, and corruption. Obasi and Okechukwu (2018) noted that these challenges make it difficult for SMEs to register their businesses, obtain permits, and comply with tax regulations.

Skills Gap

The absence of adequate entrepreneurial and managerial skills limits the productivity and scalability of SMEs (Adobor, 2020). Eze and Akpan (2021) emphasized the need for capacity-building programs for SME operators, as many lack knowledge of modern management techniques, digital tools, and global market trends.

5. Technological Constraints

Many SMEs lack access to affordable technology, which is essential for scaling operations in a digital economy (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, 2021). Limited adoption of technology hinders innovation and restricts the ability of SMEs to compete in the global market.

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Government Interventions and Policy Frameworks

Over the years, the Nigerian government has introduced numerous policies and programs to foster SME growth. Key initiatives include:

Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN): Established in 2003, SMEDAN provides capacity-building programs and enhances access to finance for SMEs.

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises Development Fund (MSMEDF): Launched by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), this ₦220 billion fund offers concessional loans to underserved sectors (PwC, 2020).

National Enterprise Development Programme (NEDEP): Focused on entrepreneurship development, this program supports SME growth. More recent interventions, such as the Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF) and the Anchor Borrowers' Programme, demonstrate the government's commitment to fostering youth entrepreneurship and improving agricultural productivity.

Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of these policies is often constrained by corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and limited awareness among SMEs (Gumel, 2019; Bello & Yusuf, 2021). For example, the success of initiatives such as the Bank of Industry's SME Fund is hindered by poor implementation and inadequate communication about available resources.

Digital Transformation of SMEs

Digital transformation has emerged as a critical growth strategy for SMEs in Nigeria. E-commerce platforms like Jumia and Konga have enabled SMEs to access broader markets, increasing visibility and customer engagement (Nwankwo et al., 2022).

Fintech innovations, such as mobile banking and digital lending platforms, have addressed traditional banking limitations by providing alternative financing options. WhatsApp has become integral to SME marketing strategies. Makinde (2023) highlights how SMEs use WhatsApp for conversational marketing, fostering trust and customer loyalty through personalized communication. Regional trade agreements, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), offer additional opportunities for SMEs to access larger markets and scale their operations (Olowe et al., 2021).

The Influence of WhatsApp Influencer Marketing on SMEs

It is no news that WhatsApp began as a conversational social media app primarily designed for personal interactions among family and friends. Over time, its simplicity and user-friendly interface made it a preferred communication tool for businesses and organizations, particularly for sharing work-related information. WhatsApp's widespread adoption can be attributed to its straightforward functionality compared to more complex applications like Discord, Slack, and Google Chat.

The informal nature of WhatsApp has made word-of-mouth marketing highly effective. This effectiveness stems from the trust established through familiarity. As Makinde (2023) notes, the platform's unique conversational tone enhances the authenticity and credibility of endorsements. This authenticity has facilitated the organic emergence of influencers who initially leveraged active communities to share their experiences with products and services. By consistently engaging their audience with educational, entertaining, and "edutaining" content, these influencers built trust and credibility. Audience feedback further strengthened their influence, making them key players in the ecosystem of WhatsApp-based marketing.

Recognizing its potential for business use, WhatsApp introduced several updates to enhance visibility and organization. For example, the maximum number of participants in group chats increased from 256 to 1028. The introduction of Communities enables users to manage multiple groups under a single umbrella, facilitating better organization across different niches. Additionally, WhatsApp's "Status" feature, now termed "Updates," integrates seamlessly with Instagram and Facebook, allowing cross-platform content sharing.

The WhatsApp Business version has further solidified the platform's position as a tool for commerce. Features tailored for business owners include advertising tools that allow the creation of ads on WhatsApp, which are then promoted on Instagram and Facebook and linked back to WhatsApp. Other features, such as labels for customer categorization (e.g., potential customer, new customer, pending payment), catalogs for showcasing products and services, and quick replies for frequently asked questions, streamline operations for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). These innovations have transformed WhatsApp from a conversational platform to a trusted space for business transactions (Negedu & Isik, 2020).

The preference for WhatsApp as a medium for transactions can be attributed to its familiarity and conversational tone. Customers are more likely to trust recommendations from individuals they know rather than anonymous sources. This dynamic has contributed to the rise of WhatsApp influencers who use their credibility to promote products and services effectively. For SMEs, leveraging WhatsApp influencers has become an essential strategy for generating leads and increasing sales. As noted by Kierian et al. (2021), WhatsApp influencer marketing has significantly contributed to the growth of SMEs by enabling them to reach a broader audience through personalized and credible endorsements.

In conclusion, the evolution of WhatsApp from a social app to a business-centric platform has created opportunities for SMEs to harness its features and influencer marketing for growth. This transformation underscores the importance of trust and authenticity in driving consumer behavior, particularly in informal digital marketplaces.

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How WhatsApp Influencer Marketing Impacts SMEs

Increased Brand Awareness

WhatsApp influencers help SMEs amplify their brand visibility, especially within targeted demographics geographic locations. By sharing promotional content in WhatsApp groups or personal networks, influencers create a ripple effect, extending the reach of marketing campaigns (Singh, 2019).

2. Cost-Effective Marketing

Traditional advertising platforms like television, radio, and newspapers are often too expensive for SMEs. WhatsApp influencer marketing offers a more affordable alternative, enabling small businesses to achieve significant marketing impact with minimal financial investment (Antler Team, 2020).

3. Higher Engagement Rates

The personal nature of WhatsApp communication fosters higher engagement rates compared to other social media platforms. Consumers are more likely to interact with promotional content shared by influencers they trust, increasing the likelihood of conversion (Taiwo Sotikare, 2023).

4. Enhanced Customer Relationships

The conversational tone of WhatsApp marketing helps SMEs build stronger relationships with their customers. Influencers act as intermediaries, bridging the gap between brands and consumers by providing personalized recommendations and addressing customer queries in real-time (Mazereeuw, 2018).

5. Localized Targeting

Many WhatsApp influencers cater to localized audiences, making them ideal partners for SMEs that rely on regional markets. This localized targeting ensures that promotional efforts reach the most relevant consumers, maximizing return on investment (Kierian et al., 2021).

Limitations of WhatsApp Influencer Marketing

Limited Analytics

Unlike platforms like Instagram or Facebook, WhatsApp offers minimal analytics for tracking the performance of marketing campaigns. This makes it difficult for SMEs to measure the success of their influencer collaborations (Insight.ng, 2023).

2. Risk of Spam

Overuse of WhatsApp for promotional purposes can lead to consumer fatigue or the perception of spam, potentially damaging the brand's reputation. SMEs must strike a balance to ensure their marketing efforts remain effective and non-intrusive (Potor, 2022).

3. Scalability Issues

While WhatsApp is excellent for localized targeting, its scalability is limited compared to platforms with broader audiences. SMEs targeting national or international markets may find WhatsApp influencer marketing insufficient as a standalone strategy (Makinde, 2023).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

WhatsApp's widespread adoption among SMEs in Nigeria can be attributed to its ubiquity and user-friendly nature. Studies, such as Akpan and Eneh (2020), emphasize that its penetration across urban and rural areas outpaces other platforms due to lower data consumption and compatibility with basic smart-phones. SMEs use WhatsApp for direct communication, enabling real-time interactions that foster trust, Nwosu, I. K., & Nwafor, A. (2019). For example, WhatsApp's group chat feature allows SMEs to engage multiple customers simultaneously, while status updates act as a cost-free advertising channel, often replacing traditional mediums like flyers or radio ads, Adebayo, O. (2020). This adoption is not only a response to WhatsApp's simplicity but also to its capacity to facilitate peer-to-peer recommendations, a factor critical in consumer decision-making, Oladokun, F., & Abiodun, E. A. (2020). Trust in personal networks plays a substantial role in influencing purchase decisions, particularly in the Nigerian cultural context where word-of-mouth remains a dominant marketing strategy, Ekpenyong, J., & Akpan, I. (2022).

Influencers on WhatsApp differ significantly from those on platforms like Instagram or Twitter. They are often ordinary individuals with strong connections within their social or professional circles, leveraging trust rather than celebrity status to influence purchasing decisions, Nwankwo, O. C., & Okafor, A. A. (2021). For instance, Uche and Fapohunda (2022) highlight how these influencers use personal stories or testimonials to promote products, making endorsements appear more genuine. Feedback mechanisms on WhatsApp, such as direct replies to statuses or messages in groups, create a two-way interaction channel, Onuoha, I. (2020). This immediacy builds credibility and allows influencers to address potential customer concerns. Furthermore, the informal nature of WhatsApp interactions allows influencers to craft persuasive, yet subtle, marketing messages that resonate with the audience's personal needs.

A Nigerian Association of Small Business Owners (NASBO) survey (2021) quantified the financial impact, with SMEs reporting an average 28% increase in sales after engaging WhatsApp influencers, Adebayo, S. O. (2021). Fashion retailers, in particular, benefited from WhatsApp's visual-sharing capabilities, Akanbi, L. (2021) allowing influencers to post real-time product images or

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videos, often demonstrating their use in practical settings. These transactions are further simplified by WhatsApp's catalog feature, which acts as a virtual storefront, Fatima, R. (2021). Coupled with payment integration through bank transfer links shared on the platform, the journey from promotion to purchase is seamless, minimizing drop-offs. This convenience is especially valuable in a market where e-commerce infrastructure is still developing.

Despite its advantages, SMEs encounter several challenges in utilizing WhatsApp for influencer marketing. One significant limitation is the absence of advanced analytics tools, Olumide, A. K. (2022). Unlike platforms like Facebook or Instagram, WhatsApp does not offer detailed metrics on reach, engagement, or conversion rates, leaving businesses reliant on anecdotal evidence or manual tracking, Eze, M. N (2022). Additionally, market saturation is a growing issue. As more SMEs and influencers adopt WhatsApp, audiences face content overload, which can lead to desensitization. Trust issues also arise when influencers misrepresent products or fail to disclose sponsorships, leading to customer dissatisfaction and potential reputational damage for both the influencer and the SME.

Comparing WhatsApp's use in Nigeria to its adoption in other African countries sheds light on its unique role in the Nigerian market. While countries like Ghana and Kenya lean towards Instagram and Facebook for influencer marketing due to their visual-centric features, Nigeria's reliance on WhatsApp is driven by its higher penetration rate and cost-effectiveness. A PwC (2020) report highlights that in countries with stronger e-commerce ecosystems, businesses use platforms with built-in payment and delivery features, whereas Nigerian SMEs leverage WhatsApp's simplicity to overcome infrastructural gaps.

The evolving features of WhatsApp, such as the introduction of Communities and Business Tools, are shaping its future in influencer marketing. Communities allow influencers to manage multiple groups under a single umbrella, fostering niche-targeted campaigns. Afolabi et al. (2023) suggest that SMEs adopting WhatsApp marketing as part of a broader digital strategy are more likely to sustain growth, leveraging these innovations to build lasting customer relationships. WhatsApp Business APIs also enable SMEs to automate interactions, creating efficiency in addressing customer queries and closing sales. Future developments, such as potential AI integration for chatbots or enhanced data analytics, could further empower SMEs in tailoring marketing campaigns.

Empirical evidence underscores WhatsApp influencer marketing's transformative potential for SMEs in Nigeria. From fostering trust through personalized interactions to driving sales growth, WhatsApp serves as a critical tool for businesses navigating a challenging economic environment. However, addressing challenges like analytics limitations and market saturation will be vital for sustained success. Integrating WhatsApp strategies with other digital tools and exploring innovative approaches will position SMEs to maximize the platform's potential.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two-Step Flow Theory

The Two-Step Flow Theory is a foundational communication theory introduced by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet in their seminal study, *The People's Choice* (1944). This theory was developed to challenge the notion of a direct influence of mass media on individuals. Instead, it posits that information flows from media sources to "opinion leaders," who then interpret and disseminate this information to others in their social circles. This process highlights the intermediary role of opinion leaders and their influence on followers' decision-making and behavior, often making media effects indirect rather than direct.

An essential aspect of the theory is the role of opinion leaders—individuals who engage with media content actively, process it critically, and share their perspectives with others. These leaders are trusted for their expertise, credibility, or relatability, and their followers rely on them for guidance in interpreting media messages. Consequently, the media's impact is mediated through these individuals, who serve as a bridge between the content and the broader audience.

Modern applications of the Two-Step Flow Theory are evident in the rise of social media influencers, particularly on platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube. Influencers function as opinion leaders by translating marketing messages into relatable narratives for their audiences. For example, Moguluwa and Ifediora (2020) explore how digital influencers in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, contribute to the growth of SMEs by acting as mediators between businesses and consumers. Their study underscores the parallels between traditional opinion leaders and modern digital influencers.

While the Two-Step Flow Theory provides valuable insights into mediated communication, it has faced critiques for oversimplifying media effects and underestimating the direct impact of mass media. With the advent of digital platforms, the roles of opinion leaders and followers have become more dynamic, often overlapping in the digital ecosystem. Individuals can simultaneously consume, interpret, and share content, leading to a more complex "multi-step" flow of information.

Despite these critiques, the theory remains relevant in explaining how mediated communication works in the digital age, particularly in contexts like WhatsApp influencer marketing. By leveraging trust and relatability, influencers drive engagement and foster connections between SMEs and consumers, reinforcing the enduring significance of opinion leaders in communication dynamics.

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Social exchange theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET), developed by sociologists such as George Homans (1958) and Peter Blau (1964), provides a framework for understanding how social interactions are based on exchanges of value between individuals. According to SET, individuals engage in social interactions or relationships where they weigh the benefits against the costs, aiming to maximize rewards while minimizing losses. The theory suggests that people evaluate their interactions based on a cost-benefit analysis, where the perceived rewards—ranging from tangible resources like money to intangible ones like emotional support or social approval—must outweigh the perceived costs, such as time or effort. The sense of reciprocity, where both parties in an interaction give and receive in a balanced manner, is central to SET. If the exchange feels equitable, the relationship will thrive; if not, it may break down or cease (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958).

In the context of WhatsApp influencer marketing for SMEs, Social Exchange Theory offers valuable insights into why and how consumers engage with influencers and brands. Influencers on WhatsApp build trust and offer value through content, recommendations, and endorsements. The followers, in return, engage by purchasing products, providing feedback, or sharing the content, thus creating a reciprocal exchange. This process is driven by the perceived benefits they receive from engaging with the influencer's recommendations, such as discounts, exclusivity, or product insights. Furthermore, the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of influencers, who maintain a personal, informal connection with their audience, enhance the overall value of the exchange. This is particularly important in the context of SMEs, where consumers tend to trust recommendations from familiar sources over anonymous advertisements.

In WhatsApp influencer marketing, businesses and influencers work together to create exchanges where the followers feel that they are gaining valuable insights, products, or entertainment. As a result, SMEs that leverage influencers can maximize their reach and increase consumer loyalty through the principle of reciprocity in SET. Influencers build their credibility by offering trusted recommendations, and SMEs benefit from a steady stream of leads that may translate into sales.

However, social exchanges are not always perfectly balanced, as there are often power dynamics involved. For instance, influencers with a large following may have more leverage, and businesses may need to offer incentives to maintain the relationship. The theory also suggests that individuals' dependence on others for emotional or financial support can influence the power in these relationships. As SMEs rely on influencers for business growth, influencers also depend on their followers' engagement for their influence and success. Thus, the dynamic can result in a mutually beneficial exchange, but one that is also subject to fluctuations based on perceived fairness or shifts in power (Huston & Burgess, 1979).

Social Exchange Theory provides a useful lens for understanding how WhatsApp influencer marketing works, particularly in how influencers and SMEs interact with their audiences to create a relationship of mutual benefit. By analyzing the costs and rewards that participants perceive in these exchanges, SET helps explain why WhatsApp influencer marketing is such an effective strategy for SMEs in the digital age.

Uses and gratification theory

Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is a communication theory that focuses on how individuals actively seek out media and content to satisfy specific needs or desires. This theory was developed by Elihu Katz and others in the 1970s and posits that media consumers are not passive recipients of information but active participants in their media consumption, seeking out content that fulfills various psychological, social, and personal needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The theory highlights that individuals make conscious choices to engage with media based on their motives, including entertainment, information, social interaction, or personal identity enhancement (Ruggiero, 2000). According to Joseph Wogu (2008), the theory deals with what the audience uses the media to do, what gratifications/gains/satisfaction they derive from using the media.

In the context of WhatsApp influencer marketing and SMEs, Uses and Gratification Theory can help explain why consumers engage with specific influencers and brands on the platform. Influencers on WhatsApp provide content that meets various needs for their followers—whether it be product recommendations, entertainment, education, or social interaction. WhatsApp as a platform allows users to interact in an informal, personalized manner, and it is through these exchanges that influencers fulfill their audience's desires for connectivity, product insights, or entertainment (Katz et al., 1973). As consumers seek gratification from their media consumption, the influencers they follow fulfill specific needs that can motivate them to engage with content, share it, or even make purchases.

For SMEs leveraging WhatsApp influencer marketing, UGT underscores the importance of understanding the specific needs of their target audiences. By tailoring the content to meet the demands for entertainment, education, or social interaction, SMEs can create stronger connections with potential customers. For example, an influencer might engage with their audience by sharing useful product reviews or offering exclusive deals, thus satisfying the audience's need for both information and social connection. This type of targeted content creates a personalized experience, which is a hallmark of WhatsApp communication, and it encourages consumers to take action, such as making purchases or recommending products to others within their network.

Uses and Gratification Theory is highly relevant to understanding the role of WhatsApp influencer marketing in the context of SMEs. By focusing on how influencers create content that satisfies the needs of their followers, SMEs can leverage WhatsApp as a

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powerful marketing tool to foster customer engagement and drive sales. The theory helps explain why users choose specific influencers and how the content provided by these influencers directly impacts consumer behavior.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The preferred choice of research design for this study was the survey approach. This method is appropriate for this study because the responses of participants who have had direct contact with the subject were a key source of data.

Sample Technique

In this regard, whilst getting the sampling size for this research design, the population size of SMEs couldn't be attained because there are no records of how many SMEs there are in the University of Nigeria; therefore, the use of purposive and convenience sampling methods was employed to determine the size of participants.

Sampling Size

The sample size of this study arrived using the convenience and purposive sampling technique. After doing this, the questionnaires were strategically sent to people who are involved in SMEs personally and through the help of friends, after which a total of 61 responses were obtained.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire.

Validity of Research Instrument

The validity of this study was done using the face validity technique as recommended by Wimmer & Dominick (2011) and Asemah et al, (2013).

Method of Data Analyses and Presentation

For comprehensive analyses of obtained data, the use of tables and charts was employed to present the results. Where necessary, percentages and frequencies served for proper interpretation and clarity of presentation. Other statistical measures proper for presenting quantitative analyses were utilized.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Analysis of Demographic Data of Respondents

The respondents' personal information, including; gender, age, marital status and religion is covered in this section. The responders provided the following response:

Table 1: Representing Response Rate

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No. Distributed	61	100
No. Returned	61	100
No. Lost	0	0

Table 2: Gender Distribution of the Respondents

Gender of Respondents	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Male	19	31.1
Female	42	68.9
Total	61	100

From the table above, the results of the analysis indicated that the majority of persons who filled the questionnaire are females, 42 (68.9%) while the males are 19 (31.1%)

Table 3: Age Distribution of the Respondents

Age of Respondents	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
16-25	48	78.7
26-35	12	19.7
35 and above	1	11.6

From the table above, the results of the analysis indicated that the majority of persons who filled the questionnaire are between the ages of 16-25 years, 48 (78.7%). Between the ages of 26-35 years had 12 respondents (19.7%), while the lowest percentage was between the ages of 35 and above (1.6%).

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Table 4: Marital Status Distribution of the Respondents

Marital Status of the Respondents	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Single	55	90.2
Married	5	8.2
Divorced	1	1.6
Never married	0	0
Total	61	100

From the table above, the results of the analysis indicated that the majority of persons who filled the questionnaire were single, 55 (90.2%), 5 respondents were married (8.2%). While the lowest percentage were divorced (1.6%) with 1 respondent.

Table 5: Business Sector Distribution of the Respondents

Business of Respondents	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Food	9	14.8
Fashion	19	31.1
Beauty	9	14.8
Services	24	39.3
Total	61	100

From the table above, the results of the analysis indicated that the majority of persons who filled the questionnaire run a service business, 24 (39.3%), 19 respondents were fashion (31.1%), 9 respondents were food and beauty at (14.8%).

Table 6: Years of Business Distribution of Respondents

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1 - 3	43	70.5
4 – 6	17	27.9
Over 6	1	1.6
Total	61	100

This table shows that, 43 (70.5%) respondents have had their business run between 1- 3 years, 17 (27.9%) have run their businesses between 4 - 6 years and 1 (1.6%) business has run theirs for over 6 years.

Table 7: WhatsApp Usage Distribution of Respondents

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	38	62.3
Weekly	10	16.4
Occasionally	9	14.8
Rarely	4	6.6
Total	61	100

This table shows that 38 (62.3%) use WhatsApp on a daily basis, 10 (16.4%) use WhatsApp weekly, 9 (14.8%) use it occasionally and 4 (6.6%) use WhatsApp rarely for business purposes.

Analysis of Psychographic Data of Respondents

The following questions below from the questionnaire were used to address the research questions accordingly. For the purpose of representing the respondents' replies, the researcher used straightforward tables and frequencies.

Question: I prefer to do my online shopping from WhatsApp than any other social media platforms.

Table 8: Respondents' data on "social media use"

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	8	13.1
Disagree	8	13.1
Neutral	19	31.1
Agree	21	34.4
Strongly	5	8.2
Total	61	100

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From table 8, 21 respondents representing 34.4% agree that they use prefer to use WhatsApp for their online shopping than any other social media platforms, 19 respondents representing 31.1% were neutral about WhatsApp as their preferred online shopping platform, 8 respondents representing 13.1% noted that they do not prefer using Whatsapp, while 5 respondents representing 8.2% noted that WhatsApp is their most preferred choice.

Question: I trust WhatsApp vendor's more than social media.

Table 9: Respondents data on “how much trust they have for WhatsApp vendors”

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	26	42.6
No	14	23
Maybe	21	34.4
Total	61	100

26 respondents representing 42.6% indicate that they trust whatsapp vendors more than other social media, 14 (23%) indicate they do not and 21 respondents representing 34.4% indicate that they are neutral as to whether they trust whatsapp vendors more.

Question: I trust WhatsApp Influencers more than I do other social media influencers.

Table 10: Respondents data on “trusting whatsapp influencers in comparison to other social media influencers”

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	22	36.1
No	23	37.7
Maybe	16	26.2
Total	61	100

While 23 (37.7%) respondents indicate that they do not trust whatsapp influencers more than other social media influencers, 22 (36.1%) indicate that they actually do trust whatsapp influencers. 16 (26.2%) are neutral.

Question: I prefer to use WhatsApp for Influencer Marketing.

Table 11: Respondents data on” social media preference for influencer marketing”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes, I do	30	49.2
No, I don't	18	29.5
Maybe	13	21.3
Total	61	100

This table shows that the majority of respondents 30 (49.2%) prefer to use Whatsapp for influencer marketing. 18 (29.5%) would rather not use Whatsapp and 13 (21.3) aren't so sure.

Question: Do you currently engage WhatsApp influencers to market your products/services?

Table 12: Respondents data showing “who's currently using a whatsapp influencer”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	32	52.5
No	29	47.5
Total	61	100

This table shows that 32 (52.5%) do not currently use Whatsapp influencer marketing for their business, while 29 (47.5%) do.

Question: How do you typically find Whatsapp Influencers?

Table 13: Respondents data on “ways whatsapp influencers will be chosen”

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Personal connections	36	59
Social media searches	20	32.8
Recommendations	39	63.9

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table 13 show that the respondents 39 (63.9%) of them would rather have whatsapp influencers recommended to them, while 36 (59%) went for personal connections and 20 (32.8%) of the respondents would search them up on social media.

Question: What criteria do you use in selecting Whatsapp influencers for your brand?

Table 14: Respondents data on “brands choosing a whatsapp influencer”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Audience size	47	77
Content relevance	34	55.7
Engagement rates	39	63.9
Professionalism	32	52.5

77% (47) which is a greater number of the participants suggests that audience size is important while picking a whatsapp influencer. 63.9% (39) say engagement rates are important, 55.7% (34) suggests content relevance while the least percentage which is 52.5% (32) are concerned about professionalism.

Question: Do you think Whatsapp is a useful tool for influencer marketing with SMEs?

Table 15: Respondents data on “the usefulness of Whatsapp to SMEs”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Really useful	34	55.7
Useful	20	32.8
Just okay	7	11.5
Total	61	100

This table shows that the majority 34 (55.7%) think that whatsapp is a very useful tool to SMEs, 20 (32.8%) think that whatsapp is useful, and 7 (11.5%) says its just okay, indicating that to run their enterprise it might not be the first three options.

Question: Do you think Whatsapp is an advantage to influencer marketing compared to other social media platforms?

Table 16: Respondents data on “Whatsapp being seen as an advantage to influencer marketing compared to other social media platforms”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	33	54.1
No	17	27.9
Maybe	11	18
Total	61	100

This table says that the majority 54.1% (33) think whatsapp is an advantage to influencer marketing in comparison to other social media platforms, 17 (27.9%) says that it is not an advantage while 11 (18%) do not know whether it is or not.

Question: Compared to other social media platforms. How effective is WhatsApp for your influencing efforts?

Table 17: Respondents data on the “the effectiveness of Whatsapp in comparison to other social media platforms”

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Mostly effective	27	44.3
Equally effective	24	29.3
Less effective	10	16.4
Total	61	100

This table shows that 27 (44.3%) consider whatsapp more effective for their influencer marketing efforts compared to other social media platforms. 24 (29.3%) says that whatsapp and other social media platforms are equally effective, while 10 (16.4%) says that whatsapp is not effective for them.

Question: How do you measure the success of influencer marketing campaigns conducted through whatsapp?

Table 18: Respondents data on “the measure of a successful whatsapp campaign”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Number of views	30	49.2
Number of referrals	46	75.4

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Number of direct messages	41	67.2
Conversion rates	28	45.9

table 17 presents different ways an enterprise can measure a successful whatsapp influencer campaign. The success rate is measured over 100% therefore 46 (75.4%) are the majority saying that the number of referrals they get translates to a successful campaign. 41(67.2%) participants say that it the number of direct messages that proves a successful campaign, 30 (49.2%) indicate that the number of views they get is a success while 28 (45.9%) being the least says that conversation rates - meaning how fast sales are made is the definition of success.

Question: To what extent does trust and personal connections influence the effectiveness of influencer marketing on WhatsApp?

Table 19: Respondents data on “the effect levels of trust and personal connection on WhatsApp influencer marketing”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly	30	49.2
Depends on influencer	19	31.1
Neutral	4	6.6
Sometimes	7	11.5
Doesn't affect me at all	1	1.6
Total	61	100

This table shows how much trust and personal connections influence the effectiveness of whatsapp influencer marketing. Majority with 49.2% (30) acknowledges that it has a strong influence. 19 (31.1%) says its dependent on the influencer, 4 (6.6%) are do not know if it does or doesn't, 7 (11.5%) says sometimes it does have an influence while 1(1.6%) respondent say that it doesn't affect whether there trust between them and the influencer.

Question: Has the use of WhatsApp for influencer marketing contributed to your business growth and revenue generation?

Table 20: Respondents data on “the level of contribution whatsapp influencer marketing gives to a business growth and revenue generation”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly	18	29.5
Moderately	29	47.5
Slightly	10	16.4
Not at all	4	6.6
Total	61	100

According to the table above, 18 (29.5%) participants claim that whatsapp influencer marketing has immensely contributed to their business growth and revenue generation, 29 (47.5%) wouldn't give credit to whatsapp influencer marketing, 10 (16.4%) says it adds a little and 4 (6.6%) respondents says it doesn't at all.

Question: When using WhatsApp for influencer marketing, do you think it brings more benefits or drawbacks?

Table 21: Respondents data on “the benefits and drawbacks of WhatsApp influencer marketing”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
More benefits	40	65.6
More drawbacks	3	4.9
Equal benefits and drawbacks	18	29.5
Total	61	100

Table 20 shows that a majority of participants 40 (65.6%) agrees that whatsapp brings more benefits to their business, 18 (29.5%) says it has equal benefits and drawbacks and a minority of the participants 3 (4.9%) says it brings more drawbacks for her business.

Question: What challenges do you think you might face with WhatsApp influencer marketing?

Table 22: Respondents data on “the challenges of WhatsApp influencer marketing”

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Inconsistent engagement	32	52.5
Limited communication tools	6	9.8

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Reduced graphic quality	20	32.8
Limitations in multimedia messages	3	4.9
Total	61	100

This table shows the challenges one might have faced when using whatsapp for influencer marketing. Majority 32 (52.5%) says the most challenging thing about whatsapp is inconsistent engagements, for 20 (32.8%) participants their challenge is reduced graphic quality, 6 (9.8%) indicated limited communication tools and 3 (4.9%) indicates the limitations in multimedia messages as the challenge.

Consumer Behaviour Analysis Data of respondents

The following questions were used to show how consumer responds to Whatsapp influencer marketing campaigns. For the purpose of representing the respondents' replies, the researcher used straightforward tables and frequencies.

Question: How often do customers mention Whatsapp influencers when interacting with your business?

Table 23: Respondents data on “the frequency of customers referring to WhatsApp influencers”

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Always	10	16.4
Frequently	16	26.2
Occasionally	16	26.2
Rarely	12	19.7
Never	7	11.5
TOTAL	61	100

According to the data above, 10 respondents (16.4%) said that their customers always mention Whatsapp influencers when interacting with their business. Additionally, 16 (26.2%) of respondents said that their customers frequently mention Whatsapp influencers when dealing with their business. Another 16 (26.2%) said that this action occurs only occasionally. With the remaining 12 (19.7%) and 7 (11.5%), their customers rarely and never mention Whatsapp influencers when interacting with their businesses respectively.

Question: Have you noticed an increase in repeat customers after using Whatsapp influencer marketing?

Table 24: Respondents data on “the frequency of repeat customers after using a WhatsApp marketer”

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Yes	42	68.9
No	19	31.1

From the table above, 42 (68.9%) of respondents noticed an increase in repeat customers after using Whatsapp influencer marketing. The remaining 19 (31.1%) didn't.

Question: What percentage of new customers do you attribute to Whatsapp influencer marketing?

Table 25: Respondents data on “the percentage of new customers attributed to Whatsapp influencer marketing”

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Less than 10%	18	29.5
10-30%	22	36.1
31-50%	13	21.3
Over 50%	8	13.1
TOTAL	61	100

From the data above, 18 (29.5%) of the respondents stated that less than 10% of their new customers can be attributed to Whatsapp influencer marketing. 22(26.1%) stated that about 10-30% of their new customers can be attributed to Whatsapp influencer marketing. 13 (21.3%) respondents stated that 31-50% of their new customers can be attributed to Whatsapp influencer marketing while 8 (13.1%) respondents attribute over 50% of their new customers to Whatsapp influencer marketing.

Question: How much of your marketing budget is allocated to Whatsapp influencer campaigns?

Table 26: Respondent data on “marketing budget allocation for whatsapp influencer campaigns.”

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Less than 10%	26	42.6

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10-30%	24	39.3
31-50%	6	9.8
Over 50%	5	8.2
TOTAL	61	100

According to the data above, 26 (42.6%) of respondents allocate less than 10% of their marketing budget to Whatsapp influencer marketing. 24 (39.3%) allocate about 10-30% of their marketing budget to Whatsapp influencer marketing. 6 (9.8%) respondents stated that they allocate 31-50% of their marketing budget to Whatsapp influencer marketing while 5 (8.2%) respondents said that they allocate over 50% of their marketing budget to Whatsapp influencer marketing.

Question: What is your average cost per campaign when working with Whatsapp influencers?

Table 27: Respondents data on “the average cost per campaign when working with WhatsApp influencers.”

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Less than ₦10,000	29	47.5
Above ₦10,000	26	42.6
Above ₦50,000	4	6.6
Above ₦100,000	2	3.3
TOTAL	61	100

From the data presented in the table, 29 (47.5%) of respondents allocate less than ₦10,000 per campaign when working with Whatsapp influencers. 26 (12.6) said that they allocate above ₦10,000, 4 (6.6%) respondents said that they allocate above ₦50,000 and 2 (3.3%) of total respondents allocate above ₦100,000 per campaign to Whatsapp influencer marketing.

Question: Do you find Whatsapp influencer marketing cost effective compared to other marketing methods?

Table 28: Respondents' data on “cost-effectiveness of whatsapp influencer marketing in comparison to other marketing methods.”

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Yes	47	77
No	14	23
TOTAL	61	100

The table above shows that 47 (77%) of total respondents find Whatsapp influencer marketing cost effective compared to marketing methods. The remaining 14 (23%) on the other hand don't.

Comparative Analysis Data of respondents

The following questions were used to measure the effectiveness of Whatsapp in comparison to other social media platforms. For the purpose of representing the respondents' replies, the researcher used straightforward tables and frequencies.

Question: Have you used any other social media platform for influencer marketing?

Table 29: Respondents data on “the use of other social media platforms other than whatsapp for influencer marketing campaigns.”

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Yes	44	72.1
No	17	27.9
TOTAL	61	100

From the table above, 44 respondents (72.1%) acknowledged that they have used other social media platforms besides Whatsapp to carry out influencer marketing campaigns. The other 17 respondents (27.9%) have only used Whatsapp to carry out influencer marketing campaigns.

Question: If yes, how's their effectiveness in comparison to Whatsapp?

Table 30: Respondents data on “the effectiveness of other social media influencer campaigns in comparison to whatsapp.”

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Very effective	14	26.9

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Effective	22	42.3
Mildly effective	13	25
Not effective	3	5.8
TOTAL	52	100

According to the data above, 14 respondents (26.9) said that other social media (others) were very effective in influencer marketing campaigns in comparison to Whatsapp influencer marketing. In addition, 22 respondents (42.3%) found others effective, 13 (25%) found others mildly effective, while 3 respondents (5.8%) found others not effective in comparison to WhatsApp influencer marketing campaigns.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this research is to find out how much influence WhatsApp influencer marketing has on SMEs in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The findings in this research explores the various aspects of WhatsApp influencer marketing, highlighting the benefits, challenges and different ways to optimize this concept. 5 open ended questions were added to the questionnaire to understand deeper the effect of WhatsApp influencer marketing on their businesses and how they feel about the concept. These questions include:

- What were your most successful campaigns and what aided the success? Answer: Majority of the responses 30 of them said that their successful campaigns were targeted at increasing sales and what made it successful were picking the right influencer, creating compelling content whilst being consistent. Some said that they targeted a specific demographic.
- What are your biggest takeaways from unsuccessful campaigns? Answer: 30 participants responded to this question saying that posting doesn't always equal conversion. Another said that understanding target audience, influencer authenticity, content quality, and measuring/optimizing strategies are crucial before embarking on a campaign. Run publicity 2 weeks before the sale. Be consistent, and ensure the quality of your materials before putting it out.
- Would you recommend WhatsApp influencer marketing to other SMEs? Why/Why not? Answer: All 33 responses said yes, Reason being that it's the fastest means to get an audience and consistency can lead to a high conversion rate. According to participants, they said it is cost effective, people look through their status everyday so it is important to be consistent cause it boosts visibility.
- What improvements would you suggest for optimizing WhatsApp influencer marketing for SMEs? Amongst the 30 responses, participants suggested WhatsApp get advanced analytics, easier influencer discovery, flexible messaging options, and better customer support. Influencers should focus on building an engaging target audience that caters to business's needs.
- What specific features of WhatsApp have been most impactful for your business? Answers: Out of 31, majority indicated that it is the WhatsApp status.

After gathering all this data, the psychographic section of the questionnaire revealed whatsapp influencer marketing is very important to SMEs.

CONCLUSION

WhatsApp influencer marketing has become a transformative tool for SMEs in Nigeria. Its simplicity, affordability, and interactive features make it an ideal platform for businesses seeking cost-effective ways to connect with customers. By fostering trust through personal connections and leveraging the cultural relevance of word-of-mouth communication, WhatsApp influencers have effectively driven sales and enhanced brand visibility. However, the absence of robust analytics and increasing market saturation pose challenges that need to be addressed for sustained growth.

The study concludes that WhatsApp marketing, when integrated with broader digital strategies and supported by ongoing platform innovations, can serve as a powerful mechanism for empowering SMEs. It also highlights the critical role of cultural and trust-based dynamics in shaping consumer behavior, underlining the importance of localized marketing approaches in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATION

- SMEs should treat WhatsApp as part of a larger marketing framework rather than the sole tool. Combining it with platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn will help reach different audience segments.
- SMEs should prioritize working with influencers who have smaller but highly engaged audiences. Micro-influencers often have closer connections with their followers, which leads to higher trust levels.
- As market saturation leads to content overload, WhatsApp could introduce algorithms to prioritize diverse and high-quality content.

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- Policymakers should collaborate with organizations and educational institutions to deliver training programs on effective digital marketing.

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