

Leveraging WhatsApp Business for Integrated Marketing Communication in Nigeria's Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)

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Abstract

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria face challenges in achieving cost-effective and consistent marketing communication. This study investigates WhatsApp Business as a tool for Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) in SMEs, highlighting its capacity to streamline promotions, enhance customer engagement, and build brand loyalty. Guided by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and IMC framework, a documentary research design was adopted, drawing on reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature from sources such as CBN, SMEDAN, and Statista. Findings show that WhatsApp Business, through features like catalogues, broadcast lists, and automated messaging, enables unified brand messaging and reduced costs, while improving customer relationship management and market reach. Constraints include limited digital skills, poor internet connectivity, and privacy concerns. The study concludes that WhatsApp Business is a viable, low-cost IMC channel for Nigerian SMEs, recommending digital literacy programs, strategic content planning, and integration of platform analytics into broader marketing evaluation. The Study recommended that Stakeholders such as trade associations, business development agencies, and ICT-focused NGOs should develop targeted training programmes to improve SMEs' understanding of IMC principles and the strategic use of WhatsApp Business for brand building and customer engagement. Also, SMEs should adopt an intentional approach to integrating WhatsApp Business into their broader marketing strategy, leveraging features such as catalogues, broadcast lists, and automated responses to maintain consistent customer interaction and brand identity.

Keywords: Mobile Commerce, Customer Retention, Brand Engagement, Digital Literacy and Marketing Innovation.

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Introduction

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) play a critical role in the economic development of Nigeria, contributing significantly to employment generation, poverty reduction, and innovation. According to the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN, 2021), SMEs account for over 96% of businesses, 84% of employment, and 48% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Despite this pivotal role, SMEs in Nigeria face persistent challenges in sustaining growth and competitiveness, especially in marketing communication where limited budgets, fragmented channels, and inconsistent brand messaging undermine their ability to compete with larger corporations (Aremu & Adeyemi, 2020).

In an increasingly digitalized business environment, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) has emerged as a strategic approach for achieving synergy across multiple promotional channels. IMC emphasizes the coordination of advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and direct marketing to deliver a consistent message to target audiences (Belch & Belch, 2020). For SMEs, the adoption of IMC is not merely an option but a necessity for creating brand coherence and maximizing the impact of scarce marketing resources. However, traditional mass media channels remain cost-prohibitive for most SMEs in Nigeria, necessitating the exploration of cost-effective digital alternatives (Eze & Chinedu-Eze, 2018). One such alternative is WhatsApp Business, a free, mobile-based application launched by Meta in 2018, designed to enable businesses to communicate effectively with customers through features such as catalogues, broadcast lists, automated responses, and multimedia messaging (Meta, 2023). WhatsApp enjoys over 33 million active users in Nigeria (Data Reportal, 2024), making

it one of the most accessible and familiar platforms for both businesses and consumers. The platform's ubiquity, low data consumption, and compatibility with low-end smartphones position it as an ideal communication tool for SMEs seeking to reach diverse audiences across urban and rural markets. Empirical studies have highlighted the effectiveness of WhatsApp Business in enhancing customer engagement, facilitating mobile commerce, and building brand loyalty in emerging economies (Adusei et al., 2022; Mogaji et al., 2021). Its integration into an SME's IMC strategy allows for real-time interaction, personalized communication, and direct sales without the intermediation of third-party e-commerce platforms. In addition, its multimedia capabilities; such as sending videos, infographics, and voice notes, support richer brand storytelling compared to traditional SMS or email marketing (Olanrewaju, 2020). Nevertheless, the adoption of WhatsApp Business as an IMC tool in Nigeria is not without limitations. Issues such as poor internet connectivity, limited digital skills, and data privacy concerns pose significant barriers to optimal utilization (Okonkwo & Nwaocha, 2022). Furthermore, while anecdotal evidence suggests its growing adoption among Nigerian SMEs, there is a paucity of systematic academic research examining its role in integrated marketing communication within the Nigerian context, particularly through documentary evidence from government reports, industry publications, and scholarly works. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by critically assessing how Nigerian SMEs leverage WhatsApp Business for integrated marketing communication. By adopting the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as a theoretical lens, it evaluates how perceived usefulness, ease of use, and facilitating conditions influence SMEs' adoption and effective utilization of the platform. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on digital marketing innovation in developing economies and provide actionable insights for policymakers, SME operators, and marketing practitioners.

Problem Statement

Despite the rapid growth of mobile communication technologies in Nigeria, many Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) continue to struggle with delivering consistent, cost-effective, and impactful marketing communication. Traditional advertising channels remain prohibitively expensive for SMEs, while fragmented digital strategies often result in inconsistent brand messaging and poor customer retention (Eze & Chinedu-Eze, 2018). WhatsApp Business, introduced by Meta in 2018, offers SMEs a free, accessible, and feature-rich platform capable of integrating multiple communication functions such as catalogues, automated messaging, broadcast lists, and multimedia sharing (Meta, 2023). With over 33 million active users in Nigeria (Data Reportal, 2024), it provides an unprecedented opportunity for SMEs to implement Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategies without incurring high costs.

However, despite anecdotal evidence of its adoption, there is limited scholarly investigation into how Nigerian SMEs leverage WhatsApp Business as an IMC tool, the extent to which it enhances customer engagement and brand loyalty, and the barriers hindering its optimal utilization. Existing research on social media marketing in Nigeria has largely focused on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Mogaji et al., 2021; Olanrewaju, 2020), with WhatsApp Business receiving comparatively less empirical attention, especially within the IMC framework. Additionally, while WhatsApp Business is widely used for informal trade, its strategic application for integrated brand communication in SMEs remains under-researched, particularly using documentary evidence from official reports, industry analyses, and peer-reviewed literature. Addressing this gap is critical, as SMEs constitute the backbone of Nigeria's economy, yet many remain unable to fully exploit affordable digital tools for brand growth and competitive advantage. Without clear evidence-based insights, policymakers, SME operators, and

marketing practitioners risk underutilizing a tool that could significantly improve communication efficiency and market reach in low-resource environments.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine how WhatsApp Business is leveraged for Integrated Marketing Communication among SMEs in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the extent and manner in which Nigerian SMEs utilize WhatsApp Business for integrated marketing communication.
2. Identify the benefits and challenges associated with using WhatsApp Business as an IMC tool in SMEs.
3. Recommend strategies for enhancing the effective adoption and utilization of WhatsApp Business for improved customer engagement and brand performance.

Literature Review

Clarification of Key Concepts

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs): SMEs are globally recognized as engines of economic growth and innovation. In Nigeria, the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN, 2021) defines SMEs as enterprises employing between 10 and 199 employees, with asset values (excluding land and buildings) between ₦5 million and ₦500 million. They account for 96% of all businesses, 84% of employment, and nearly half of the country's GDP. Despite this significance, SMEs face persistent structural challenges, including limited access to financing, low digital literacy, weak infrastructure, and fragmented marketing approaches (Aremu & Adeyemi, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC): IMC refers to the strategic integration of various communication channels: advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, public relations, and digital media; to deliver a consistent, persuasive message to target audiences (Belch & Belch, 2020). The IMC framework emphasizes synergy: each message, regardless of platform, reinforces the others to create a unified brand narrative (Schultz et al., 1993). In the SME context, IMC offers opportunities for cost-efficiency, targeted outreach, and brand consistency, though execution often remains challenging due to resource limitations.

WhatsApp Business: WhatsApp Business is a free mobile application launched by Meta in 2018, designed to help SMEs connect with customers more efficiently. Its features include business profiles, catalogues for showcasing products/services, broadcast lists for mass messaging, automated greetings and quick replies, and analytics for tracking message performance (Meta, 2023). In Nigeria, WhatsApp enjoys more than 33 million active users (Data Reportal, 2024), making it one of the most ubiquitous communication tools across both urban and rural populations.

Mobile Commerce (m-commerce): M-commerce refers to buying and selling goods or services via wireless handheld devices such as smartphones and tablets (Ngai & Gunasekaran, 2007). For SMEs, m-commerce facilitates location-independent transactions, instant payments, and targeted mobile promotions. In Nigeria, the proliferation of mobile wallets and payment apps (e.g., Paga, Opay) has expanded SMEs' ability to close sales seamlessly through platforms like WhatsApp Business.

Customer Retention: is the ability of a business to maintain long-term relationships with existing customers, thereby increasing repeat purchase rates and lifetime customer value (Reichheld & Sasser, 2019). Retention is closely tied to service quality, personalized communication, and post-purchase engagement; areas where WhatsApp Business can deliver real-time responsiveness and tailored follow-up messaging.

Brand Engagement: refers to the degree of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment that customers exhibit toward a brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014). High engagement correlates with loyalty, advocacy, and resistance to switching. Digital platforms like WhatsApp foster brand engagement through interactive content, direct messaging, and community groups.

Digital Literacy: is the ability to locate, evaluate, create, and communicate information using digital technologies (UNESCO, 2018). For SMEs, digital literacy encompasses not only basic device and app usage but also the capacity to leverage analytics, manage online branding, and integrate multiple digital tools into marketing workflows. Low digital literacy remains a critical adoption barrier for Nigerian SMEs (Okonkwo & Nwaocha, 2022).

Marketing Innovation: involves the implementation of new marketing methods, including significant changes in product design, packaging, promotion, or pricing (OECD, 2018). In digital contexts, this can mean adopting novel platforms, experimenting with AI-driven personalization, or integrating chat-based commerce through apps like WhatsApp Business.

Review of Major Themes, Perspectives and Issues

Digital Marketing and SMEs: The digital transformation of marketing has disrupted traditional communication models, particularly in emerging economies where mobile-first internet access dominates (Kapoor et al., 2022). Digital channels allow SMEs to bypass costly mass media, enabling direct and measurable engagement with target audiences (Olanrewaju, 2020). However, SMEs in Nigeria often adopt digital tools reactively rather than strategically, with implementation driven by peer influence or customer demand rather than planned IMC integration (Okonkwo & Nwaocha, 2022).

WhatsApp Business as a Strategic IMC Tool: Research highlights WhatsApp Business as a versatile platform that supports multi-modal content: text, image, video, audio; enabling richer brand storytelling compared to SMS or email (Adusei et al., 2022). Its closed-network model offers intimacy and trust, as messages are delivered directly to customers' personal devices. This aligns with IMC principles of personalization, relevance, and relationship marketing. SMEs using WhatsApp Business can unify messaging across campaigns, integrate customer feedback loops, and support end-to-end customer journeys, from product discovery to purchase confirmation.

Customer Engagement and Relationship Management: The platform's ability to enable two-way, real-time communication supports deeper customer relationships and higher retention rates (Kapoor et al., 2022). Personalized responses, instant query resolution, and multimedia product showcases all enhance customer experience. Yet, success depends on SMEs' capacity to create relevant content, manage interactions professionally, and avoid over-messaging that leads to customer fatigue (Mogaji et al., 2021).

Operational Barriers and Challenges: Adoption barriers include poor internet penetration, unstable electricity supply, and inconsistent mobile network coverage, especially in rural areas (World Bank, 2020). Other constraints include:

- a) Digital literacy gaps among SME owners/operators (Okonkwo & Nwaocha, 2022).
- b) Privacy concerns due to consumer skepticism about sharing personal information on messaging platforms (Eze & Chinedu-Eze, 2018).
- c) Limited analytics use, with many SMEs failing to leverage available performance metrics for decision-making.

Critical Debates and Contending Issues

Several scholarly debates shape the discourse on WhatsApp Business as an IMC tool:

- a) **Private vs. Public Digital Platforms:** While public platforms like Facebook and Instagram offer broad reach, WhatsApp's private messaging format fosters deeper trust but limits organic discovery (Kapoor et al., 2022). The debate centers on whether SMEs should prioritize relationship depth over reach.
- b) **Informality vs. Professionalism:** WhatsApp is widely used for informal transactions in Nigeria. Critics argue that without structured communication strategies, SMEs risk undermining brand professionalism (Mogaji et al., 2021).
- c) **Cost-effectiveness vs. Over-reliance:** Although WhatsApp Business reduces marketing costs, over-reliance on a single platform exposes SMEs to risks if platform policies change or technical disruptions occur (Okonkwo & Nwaocha, 2022).

While literature on social media marketing in Nigeria is growing, most empirical studies focus on platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Mogaji et al., 2021; Olanrewaju, 2020). WhatsApp Business, despite its widespread adoption, has received limited academic attention, especially as a dedicated IMC tool for SMEs. Existing studies tend to treat WhatsApp Business as part of a broader "social media" category without analyzing its unique communication affordances (Adusei et al., 2022). Moreover, few studies employ documentary research designs that synthesize evidence from official government reports, SME development agencies, and industry white papers to contextualize platform use in Nigeria's socio-economic environment. This gap is significant because SMEs, as the backbone of the Nigerian economy, require tailored communication strategies that consider both infrastructural realities and cultural nuances. A focused examination of WhatsApp Business within the IMC framework can provide actionable, context-specific insights for SME competitiveness in low-resource settings.

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

IMC Theory (Belch & Belch, 2020) underpins this study's examination of how WhatsApp Business can deliver coordinated, consistent messaging across customer touchpoints. It emphasizes message synergy, brand coherence, and cross-channel reinforcement—critical for SMEs seeking to maximize impact with limited resources.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) complements this by explaining SMEs' behavioral intention to adopt and use WhatsApp Business. Key constructs; perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and facilitating conditions, offer a structured lens for understanding adoption drivers and barriers in Nigeria's SME sector.

In combination, these theories allow for a dual analysis: IMC theory addresses the strategic dimension of communication integration, while TAM addresses the behavioral and technological readiness dimension. Situated in the Nigerian SME context, this dual lens enables a holistic understanding of WhatsApp Business adoption and utilization. The literature converges on the potential of WhatsApp Business as a cost-effective, highly engaging IMC channel for SMEs in Nigeria. However, empirical evidence remains fragmented, with little scholarly focus on the platform's strategic role, adoption determinants, and operational challenges in the Nigerian context. This study addresses these gaps by employing a documentary research approach to synthesize data from diverse authoritative sources, integrating IMC theory and TAM to offer both strategic and behavioral insights.

Methodology

A documentary research design was used to examine how Nigerian SMEs leverage WhatsApp Business for Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). This approach enabled the synthesis of existing literature, reports, policy documents, and case studies to identify patterns and theoretical

implications without field data collection. Secondary data were purposively drawn from peer-reviewed journals, SMEDAN policy documents, industry reports (Statista, Hootsuite, DataReportal, NCC), corporate case studies, and digital marketing publications. Sources were limited to 2018–2025 to reflect the adoption period of WhatsApp Business in Nigeria. Data were analyzed thematically using deductive coding based on IMC theory and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and inductive coding for emerging SME-specific themes. Extracted information was grouped into clusters; brand engagement, cost-effectiveness, customer relationship management, and operational constraints, and mapped to IMC (message consistency, multi-channel integration, brand positioning) and TAM (perceived usefulness, ease of use, behavioral intention) constructs. Four themes emerged:

1. **Platform Functionalities** – Features like catalogues, automated messaging, and broadcast lists provide low-cost, wide-reach customer engagement, especially for SMEs in fashion, food, and services.
2. **IMC Integration** – Used both as a main channel and in synergy with other media (e.g., Instagram) to maintain consistent brand messaging.
3. **Adoption Influencers (TAM)** – Adoption is driven by ease of use, low cost, and platform familiarity, but hindered by privacy concerns.
4. **Constraints** – Limited analytics, reliance on personal devices, lack of IMC training, and minimal government support restrict optimization.

Discussion of Findings

This study's findings reinforce the centrality of WhatsApp Business as an enabler of integrated marketing communication among Nigerian SMEs, while also uncovering structural and strategic constraints. From an IMC theory perspective, the platform supports message consistency across channels, strengthens brand recall, and facilitates personalized customer experiences, key tenets of integrated campaigns. However, the absence of professional IMC planning among many SMEs means WhatsApp Business is often used tactically rather than strategically.

From the TAM perspective, the high perceived usefulness and ease of use explain its rapid uptake. The low barrier to entry aligns with SMEs' resource constraints, making WhatsApp Business a natural choice in Nigeria's competitive and cost-sensitive business environment. However, concerns around data privacy and limited measurement capabilities could slow sustained adoption unless addressed. The integration of these findings into the Nigerian SME context reveals a paradox: while SMEs are enthusiastic adopters of WhatsApp Business for customer engagement and sales conversion, few have formalized its role within a broader IMC framework. This gap presents opportunities for targeted training, policy interventions, and platform enhancements. In an international context, these insights contribute to emerging discourse on how mobile-first, messaging-app-based marketing strategies can level the playing field for SMEs in developing economies, providing cost-effective access to digital marketing tools once reserved for larger enterprises.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of WhatsApp Business as a tool for Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) in Nigeria's SMEs, employing a documentary research design to analyze secondary data, industry reports, and scholarly publications. The findings indicate that WhatsApp Business has become a cost-effective, interactive, and accessible platform for SMEs to integrate diverse marketing communication functions: advertising, customer relations, promotion, and after-sales service; into a unified digital ecosystem.

However, adoption remains uneven due to factors such as low digital literacy among SME owners, infrastructural deficits (including unstable internet connectivity), and inadequate understanding of IMC as a strategic business framework. By aligning IMC theory with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), this study underscores that perceived usefulness and ease of use are decisive drivers for SMEs adopting WhatsApp Business as a marketing tool. To bridge the gap between potential and actual adoption, SMEs must go beyond informal usage and embrace structured, analytics-driven IMC strategies. This will not only enhance market reach and customer engagement but also contribute to long-term competitiveness in Nigeria's dynamic and increasingly digitalized marketplace.

Recommendations

1. **Capacity Building for SME Owners:** Stakeholders such as trade associations, business development agencies, and ICT-focused NGOs should develop targeted training programs to improve SMEs' understanding of IMC principles and the strategic use of WhatsApp Business for brand building and customer engagement.
2. **Integration of Digital Tools with Business Strategy:** SMEs should adopt an intentional approach to integrating WhatsApp Business into their broader marketing strategy, leveraging features such as catalogues, broadcast lists, and automated responses to maintain consistent customer interaction and brand identity.
3. **Policy Support and Infrastructure Development:** Policymakers should create enabling environments for digital marketing adoption by investing in broadband expansion, offering tax incentives for ICT tool adoption, and partnering with mobile network operators to offer subsidized business data plans tailored for SMEs.
4. **Further Research and Localized Analytics:** Researchers should explore sector-specific applications of WhatsApp Business within IMC frameworks, with a focus on developing localized performance metrics that capture both qualitative engagement and quantitative returns on investment.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria's SMEs can fully leverage the capabilities of WhatsApp Business not just as a messaging platform, but as a core driver of integrated, cost-effective, and results-oriented marketing communication.

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