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Strategic Marketing Practices and Small and Medium Enterprises Performance: The Moderating Role of Talent Management in Niger State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines how strategic marketing practices influence the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Niger State, Nigeria, with a focus on the moderating role of talent management. SMEs in Nigeria operate in highly competitive and resource-constrained environments, making the integration of effective marketing strategies and human capital management essential for sustained performance. Guided by Strategic Choice Theory and the Resource-Based View, the study investigates the effects of market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing on SME performance while assessing whether talent management enhances these relationships. A descriptive survey design was employed, targeting 793 SMEs registered with the Niger State Board of Internal Revenue, with a sample of 260 selected using the Krejcie and Morgan technique, resulting in 253 valid responses collected through simple random sampling. Reliability of the measurement instrument was confirmed using the Kuder–Richardson Formula 20, with coefficients exceeding 0.70. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and logistic regression, incorporating interaction terms to capture the moderating influence of talent management. Results reveal that market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing positively and significantly affect SME performance, with innovation orientation showing the strongest impact. Talent management contributes directly to performance and significantly strengthens the effects of strategic marketing practices. The study concludes that the success of SME marketing strategies depends heavily on effective talent management and recommends structured recruitment, targeted training, performance-based incentives, and retention strategies to ensure marketing initiatives translate into measurable performance outcomes. These findings provide empirical evidence on how talent management moderates the effectiveness of strategic marketing practices, offering actionable insights for SME owners, managers, and policymakers seeking to enhance firm performance in developing economies.

Keywords: Strategic marketing, SME performance, talent management, market and innovation orientation, digital marketing adoption

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1. Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) constitute a critical component of Nigeria's economic structure, contributing substantially to employment generation, income creation, and local economic development. National economic reports consistently show that SMEs dominate business activities across sectors and regions, underscoring their relevance to economic resilience and inclusive growth. In Nigeria, SMEs account for a considerable share of gross domestic product and remain a major source of employment, particularly at the sub-national level (Oluremi & Maku, 2024). Despite their importance, many SMEs continue to experience persistent performance challenges associated with intense competition, resource constraints, limited managerial capacity, and an increasingly dynamic business environment.

In response to these challenges, strategic marketing practices such as market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing have gained prominence as mechanisms through which SMEs can enhance competitiveness and improve performance. Market orientation enables firms to identify and respond effectively to customer needs, innovation orientation supports the development of new products and processes, while digital marketing facilitates wider market reach and cost-effective customer engagement. Empirical evidence from developing economies, including Nigeria, suggests that the adoption of digital marketing tools and customer-focused strategies can improve SME outcomes (Lestari, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these strategies often depends on the internal capabilities available to support their implementation.

One such capability is talent management, which involves the systematic attraction, development, motivation, and retention of skilled employees. Talent management has increasingly been recognised as a strategic resource that enhances organizational adaptability, innovation capacity, and strategic execution. Prior studies indicate that effective talent management strengthens employee commitment and supports the successful implementation of business strategies, although its influence may vary across organizational contexts and firm sizes (Bassem & Kayan, 2016). Despite this recognition, empirical evidence on how talent management interacts with strategic marketing practices to influence SME performance remains limited, particularly within Nigeria's sub-national contexts.

Existing studies on strategic marketing and firm performance have largely concentrated on large firms or specific sectors, with limited attention to SMEs and the moderating role of talent management. For example, Ambili (2024) examined strategic marketing strategies for sustainable growth using international evidence, while Ohunakin, Adeniji, Ogunlusi, Igbadumhe, Salau, and Sodeinde, (2020) focused on talent retention and employee behavioural outcomes in Nigeria's hospitality sector. Similarly, Alao, Akinsunmi. Odunmbaku, and Adeeko, (2017), analysed the effect of strategic marketing practices on the competitive performance of SMEs in Ogun State but did not consider the role of talent management. Moreover, many of these studies relied predominantly on conventional analytical techniques such as correlation and multiple regression, offering limited insight into interaction effects.

Against this background, there remains a clear empirical gap regarding how talent management conditions the relationship between strategic marketing practices specifically market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing and SMEs performance within Niger State. This study addresses this gap by examining the moderating role of talent management in the relationship between strategic marketing practices and SMEs performance in Niger State, Nigeria. By doing so, the study provides context-specific evidence that is expected to inform SMEs owners, managers, and policymakers on how internal human capital capabilities can strengthen marketing strategies and support sustainable firm performance in a challenging business environment.

1.1. Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the study is to:

i. Examine the effect of market orientation on SME performance.

ii. Evaluate the influence of innovation orientation on SME performance.

iii. Determine whether talent management moderates the relationship between digital marketing and SME performance**.**

1.2. Research Hypotheses

$H0_1$**:** Market orientation has no significant effect on SME performance.

$H0_2$**:** Innovation orientation has no significant influence on SME performance.

$H0_3$**:** Talent management does not significantly moderate the relationship between digital marketing and SME performance.

The foregoing discussion highlights the central role of strategic marketing practices in enhancing SME performance, while also recognising the importance of internal organisational capabilities. Although prior studies have examined these constructs independently, limited attention has been given to how talent management interacts with strategic marketing dimensions such as market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing. This study therefore integrates these constructs within a unified framework, with detailed conceptual and empirical foundations presented in the subsequent literature review section.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Talent Management

Talent management extends beyond formal human resource systems typically found in large organisations. Within small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly in Niger State, it reflects the practical efforts of business owners to attract, develop, motivate, and retain employees with the requisite skills for business continuity and growth. These practices are often informal but remain critical to organisational performance, especially in contexts characterised by limited financial resources and high employee mobility (Ohunakin et al., 2020).

Effective talent management enhances employee commitment, operational stability, and the successful execution of business strategies. SMEs that invest in employee development through training, equitable compensation, and participatory decision-making tend to experience lower turnover and stronger internal cohesion. Such stability enables firms to focus on strategic activities, including customer engagement, innovation, and market expansion, thereby improving overall performance (Bassem & Kayan, 2016). Retaining skilled employees within the Nigerian SME environment remains challenging due to competition from larger firms, economic volatility, and constrained financial capacity. Consequently, SME owners frequently rely on non-financial incentives such as career development opportunities, flexible work arrangements, job security, and strong interpersonal relationships. Although informal, these practices constitute a significant dimension of talent management in SMEs.

Employees also play a critical role in implementing strategic initiatives, including market intelligence gathering, digital marketing execution, and innovation activities. Weak talent management practices may hinder the effective translation of marketing strategies into performance outcomes, whereas a skilled and motivated workforce strengthens strategic implementation (Ohunakin et al., 2020).

2.2. Strategic Marketing

Strategic marketing is a fundamental driver of organisational success, involving the planning, analysis, formulation, and implementation of marketing strategies aimed at achieving organisational objectives within specific market segments (Hossain, 2017). Contemporary perspectives conceptualise strategic marketing as a comprehensive process encompassing planning, execution, and evaluation of marketing activities to achieve sustained competitive advantage (Lestari, 2023). Strategic marketing practices focus on enabling firms to become customer- and market-oriented through the systematic collection and analysis of market intelligence, followed by the implementation of appropriate strategies. The primary objective is to enhance business performance by creating and sustaining competitive advantage. For SMEs, the adoption of strategic marketing practices facilitates effective market positioning, product differentiation, and alignment of offerings with customer needs, thereby improving performance outcomes.

In this study, strategic marketing is operationalised through three key dimensions: market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing. Empirical evidence supports the relevance of these practices. For instance, Alao et al. (2017) found a significant relationship between strategic marketing practices and the performance of MSMEs in Ogun State, Nigeria, with performance measured in terms of sales, market share, profit, and growth.

2.3. Market Orientation

Market orientation refers to the extent to which firms generate, disseminate, and respond to market intelligence in order to understand and satisfy customer needs, thereby achieving sustained competitive advantage (Wambugu, 2018). In Niger State, SMEs operate in highly competitive and price-sensitive environments where customer preferences evolve rapidly. SMEs that adopt a market-oriented approach maintain close relationships with customers, respond promptly to feedback, and adapt their offerings to meet emerging demands. Such responsiveness enhances customer satisfaction and strengthens market positioning despite resource constraints (Egberi & Osio, 2019). Market orientation also involves internal coordination, where information regarding customers and competitors is shared among employees to facilitate informed decision-making. In SMEs, this coordination is often informal but effective due to close interactions between owners and staff, enabling rapid responses to market changes (Adetayo & Akingbade, 2025). Adopting a market-oriented approach allows SMEs to identify opportunities for differentiation and value creation, improve service delivery, and build customer loyalty, all of which are essential for sustainable performance (Alkhafagi, 2024).

2.4. Innovation Orientation

Innovation orientation represents a strategic posture that emphasises the development and implementation of new ideas, products, processes, and market approaches to address evolving business challenges. It encompasses entrepreneurial activities such as opportunity recognition, idea generation, evaluation, and market entry (Ayinaddis, 2023). This construct comprises multiple dimensions, including technological, product, process, distribution (channel), and market innovation (Akande et al., 2019). SMEs adopt innovation-oriented strategies to remain competitive by introducing new products, improving operational processes, and exploring new market opportunities. Empirical studies demonstrate the performance implications of innovation orientation. Borodako et al. (2023) found that innovation orientation positively influences knowledge management, which in turn enhances organisational performance. This highlights the role of innovation as a critical mechanism through which SMEs can achieve sustained competitive advantage.

2.5. Digital Marketing

Digital marketing refers to the use of digital technologies and online platforms to support marketing activities and business operations through the dissemination of products, services, and information (Bruce et al., 2023). It encompasses tools such as websites, social media, email marketing, and e-commerce platforms. For SMEs, digital marketing is particularly important as it enhances visibility, expands market reach, and enables cost-effective customer engagement. Empirical evidence supports its effectiveness. Aishwarya et al. (2022) found that increased awareness and utilisation of digital marketing tools significantly improve the competitive capacity of SMEs. Similarly, Bruce et al. (2023), in a study of SMEs in Ghana, reported that perceived behavioural control and subjective norms significantly influence digital marketing adoption. These findings underscore the importance of digital capabilities in driving SME growth and competitiveness.

2.6. SMEs Performance

SME performance refers to the extent to which small and medium enterprises achieve their operational and strategic objectives, often measured through indicators such as sales growth, profitability, market share, and business expansion. In Nigeria, SMEs are typically defined based on employment size and asset value. According to Oyedokun and Micah (2019), SMEs employ between 10 and 300 employees. The Federal Ministry of Industry further defines SMEs as enterprises with assets below ₦200 million and fewer than 300 employees, while small-scale enterprises have assets below ₦50 million and fewer than 100 employees. Performance measurement in SMEs is essential for assessing business success and guiding strategic decision-making, particularly in dynamic and resource-constrained environments.

2.7. Theoretical Framework

This study underpins by following theories, strategic choice approach and resource based view.

2.7.1. Strategic Choice Approach

The strategic choice approach emphasizes the role of managerial strategy as a key determinant of organizational performance Friend and Hickling, (2005). This perspective assumes that firms operate within an open and dynamic market environment characterized by both opportunities and constraints. Accordingly, a firm's ability to make effective strategic decisions in response to environmental conditions significantly influences its performance outcomes. Within the context of small and medium enterprises, this approach highlights the importance of deliberate and informed strategic actions. By adopting suitable marketing strategies, SME owners can strengthen their competitive position and improve profitability, particularly in volatile business environments such as Nigeria.

2.7.2. Resource-Based Theory

The Resource-Based Theory (RBT), originally articulated by Penrose (1959), explains firm performance in terms of the effective management of internal resources, diversification strategies, and productive opportunities. A central premise of RBT is that firms possess heterogeneous resources and capabilities, which account for differences in competitive advantage across organizations. The theory emphasizes that sustainable competitiveness is achieved by leveraging existing firm-specific resources and capabilities to formulate effective business and marketing strategies. These resources include both tangible assets such as buildings, plants, and equipment and intangible assets, including brand reputation, copyrights, and patents. Additionally, RBT highlights the strategic importance of financial strength, technology, market reach, and managerial and entrepreneurial capabilities in enhancing firm performance. The study integrates Resource-Based Theory (what firms possess) with the Strategic Choice Approach (how firms deploy those possessions), thereby offering a holistic explanation of SME performance. Figure 1 shows an integrated theoretical framework for SMEs performance.

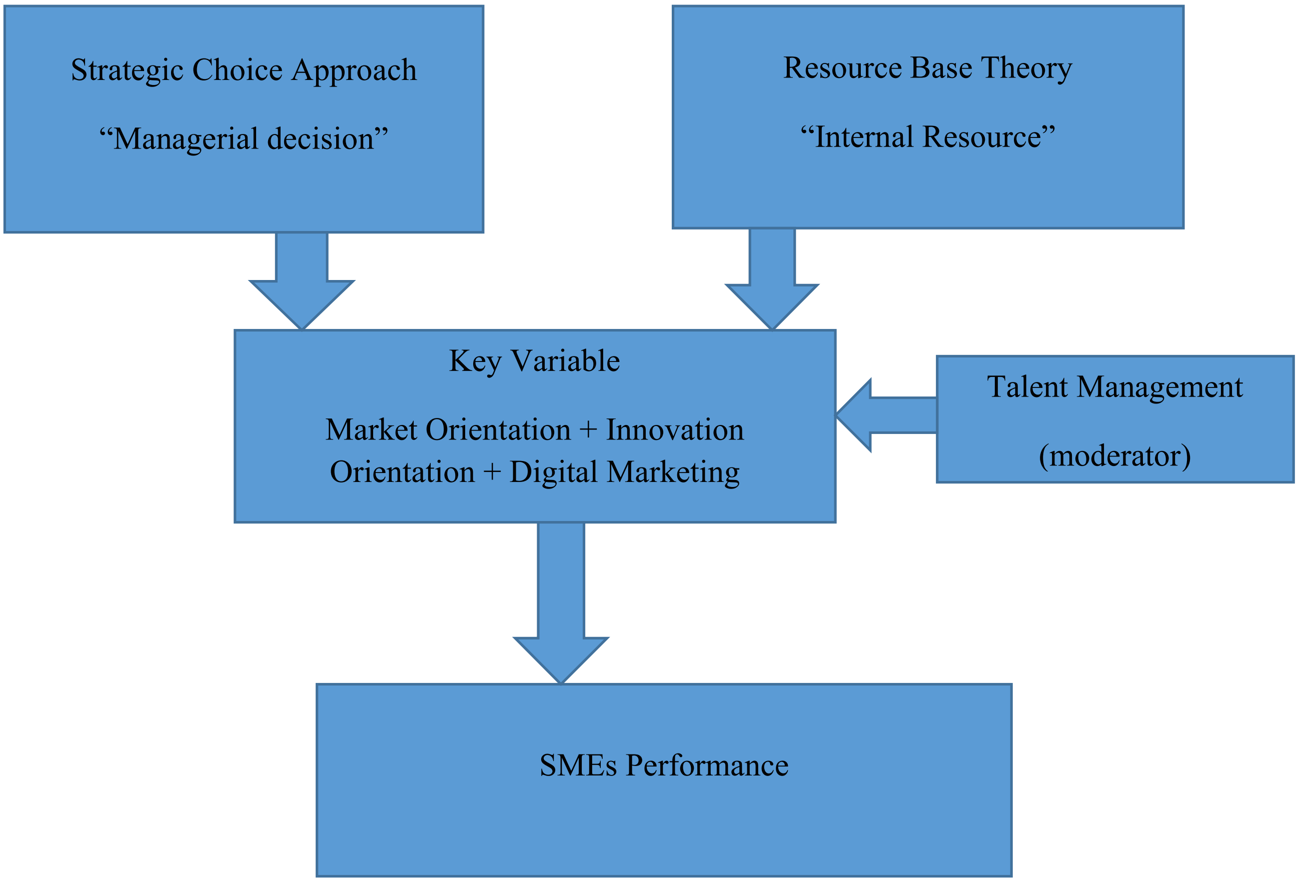

Figure 1: Integrated theoretical framework for SMEs performance.

3. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. The target population consist of all SMEs registered with the Niger State Board of Internal Revenue across key sectors, including agribusiness, manufacturing, food processing, printing, and services. Records from the Board indicate that a total of 793 SMEs were registered across these sectors as of 2024. Using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table, a sample of 260 SMEs was selected, from which 253 usable questionnaires were retrieved. Data were collected through simple random sampling. The reliability of the dichotomous questionnaire items was assessed using the Kuder–Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20). The coefficients obtained were 0.82 for SME Performance, 0.79 for Market Orientation, 0.81 for Innovation Orientation, 0.76 for Digital Marketing, and 0.84 for Talent Management. Since all values exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70, the instrument was considered reliable for the study. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and logistic regression techniques due to the binary nature of the dependent variable with interaction terms incorporated to examine the moderating role of talent management.

The study adopted and modified logit regression model**,** to determine whether talent management moderates these relationships, interaction terms were included:

$$SMEP_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 MO + \beta_2 IO + \beta_3 DM + \beta_4 TM + \beta_5(MO \times TM) + \beta_6(IO \times TM) + \beta_7(DM \times TM) + \mu$$

Where: SMEP = SME Performance; MO = Market Orientation; IO = Innovation Orientation; DM = Digital Marketing; β_0 = Intercept; β_1–β_3 = Coefficients; (MO × TM) = Interaction between market orientation and talent management; (IO × TM) = Interaction between innovation orientation and talent management; (DM × TM) = Interaction between digital marketing and talent management; μ = Error term

4. Results

The descriptive statistics show that respondents generally agreed with all the key variables examined in the study, as the mean scores for market orientation, innovation orientation, digital marketing, talent management, and SME performance were all above the decision benchmark. Market orientation recorded a mean of 3.18, indicating that most SMEs actively gather and respond to market information, with responses showing a high level of consistency. Innovation orientation had the highest mean score (3.24), suggesting that SMEs place strong emphasis on creativity and innovative practices.

Digital marketing also recorded a high mean score (3.10), reflecting the use of digital platforms for marketing and customer engagement, although responses were slightly more varied. Talent management recorded a mean of 3.15, indicating moderate agreement on the adoption of employee recruitment, development, and retention practices. SME performance recorded a mean of 3.20, suggesting that respondents generally perceived their businesses as performing well. Overall, the results indicate positive orientations toward strategic marketing practices and talent management, which are associated with improved SME performance. Table 1 shows the summary of the descriptive results.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	M	SD	Decision
Market Orientation	3.18	0.61	Agreed
Innovation Orientation	3.24	0.57	Agreed
Digital Marketing	3.10	0.64	Agreed
Talent Management	3.15	0.59	Agreed
SME Performance	3.20	0.63	Agreed

M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

The logit regression results show that market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing have positive and statistically significant effects on SME performance. Market orientation significantly improves performance, with SMEs that are more market-oriented being more likely to achieve better outcomes (OR = 1.842, $p = 0.013$). Innovation orientation has the strongest effect, indicating that innovation-focused SMEs are substantially more likely to perform better (OR = 2.156, $p = 0.002$). Digital marketing also positively influences SME performance, suggesting that SMEs adopting digital marketing practices have higher chances of improved performance (OR = 1.667, $p = 0.024$). The constant term is statistically insignificant ($p = 0.604$), indicating that SME performance is largely explained by the strategic marketing variables included in the model. Table 2 shows the logit regression results predicting SME performance.

Table 2: Logit Regression Results Predicting SME Performance

Variable	Odds Ratio	SE	Z	p	95% CI
Market Orientation (MO)	1.842	0.462	2.48	.013	1.14–2.98
Innovation Orientation (IO)	2.156	0.521	3.09	.002	1.33–3.50
Digital Marketing (DM)	1.667	0.410	2.25	.024	1.07–2.78
Constant	0.922	0.144	-0.52	.604	

SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval.

The moderated logit regression results show that market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing remain positive and statistically significant predictors of SME performance after introducing talent management. Market orientation increases the likelihood of improved performance by about 62% (OR = 1.621, p = 0.045), innovation orientation by about 84% (OR = 1.844, p = 0.020), and digital marketing by about 53% (OR = 1.532, p = 0.037). Talent management also has a strong and significant direct effect on SME performance (OR = 1.791, p = 0.006), indicating that SMEs with effective talent management practices are more likely to perform better.

The interaction effects further affirm the moderating role of talent management. Talent management significantly strengthens the effects of market orientation (MO × TM: OR = 2.209, p = 0.001), innovation orientation (IO × TM: OR = 2.442, p < 0.001), and digital marketing (DM × TM: OR = 1.967, p = 0.003) on SME performance. This implies that SMEs with strong talent management systems derive greater performance benefits from their marketing strategies. The constant term is statistically insignificant (p = 0.260), indicating that SME performance is primarily explained by the strategic marketing and talent management variables in the model. Table 3 shows the moderated logit regression results predicting SME performance.

Table 3: Moderated Logit Regression Results Predicting SME Performance

Variable	Odds Ratio	SE	Z	p
MO	1.621	0.544	2.01	.045
IO	1.844	0.486	2.32	.020
DM	1.532	0.401	2.08	.037
TM	1.791	0.453	2.75	.006
MO × TM	2.209	0.671	3.28	.001
IO × TM	2.442	0.712	3.61	.000
DM × TM	1.967	0.584	2.98	.003
Constant	0.811	—	-1.13	.260

MO = Market Orientation; IO = Innovation Orientation; DM = Digital Marketing; TM = Talent Management; SE = Standard Error.

The diagnostic results show that the moderated logistic regression model is reliable and suitable for the analysis (Table 4). The Likelihood Ratio test confirms that the model is statistically significant overall, while the Hosmer–Lemeshow test indicates that the model fits the data well.

Furthermore, the Nagelkerke R^2 points to strong explanatory power, and the high classification accuracy suggests that the model predicts outcomes effectively. The relatively low VIF values also reveal that multicollinearity is not a concern, and the link test confirms that there is no model specification error.

Table 4: Model Diagnostic Tests for Moderated Logit Regression

Diagnostic Test	Statistic	Value	Decision Rule	Interpretation
Likelihood Ratio (LR) Test	χ^2	68.47***	$p < .05$	Model is statistically significant
Hosmer–Lemeshow Test	χ^2	6.12	$p > .05$	Model fits the data well
Cox & Snell R^2	—	0.28	Closer to 1 is better	Moderate explanatory power
Nagelkerke R^2	—	0.36	0.20–0.40 is strong	Strong explanatory power
Classification Accuracy	%	78.3%	>70% acceptable	High predictive ability
Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)	Mean VIF	2.64	<10 acceptable	No multicollinearity
Model Specification (Link Test)	p-value	0.412	$p > .05$	No specification error

***$p < .001$.

5. Discussion and Limitations

The findings show that market orientation has a positive and statistically significant effect on SME performance in Niger State, indicating that SMEs that actively gather and respond to market information are more likely to achieve improved profitability, market share, and customer satisfaction. This result is consistent with earlier studies (Alao et al., 2017; Egberi & Osio, 2019). The finding also supports strategic choice theory, which emphasizes that deliberate customer-focused strategies enhance firm performance, particularly in competitive and resource-constrained environments such as Niger State. Innovation orientation was also found to have a positive and significant effect on SME performance. This suggests that SMEs that emphasize creativity, new product development, and process improvement are more likely to perform better. The result aligns with previous studies (Akande et al., 2019; Borodako et al., 2023) and supports the Resource-Based View, which identifies innovation capability as a key source of sustainable competitive advantage.

Similarly, digital marketing has a significant positive effect on SME performance. SMEs that utilize digital platforms are more likely to improve their market reach, customer engagement, and sales performance. This finding is consistent with earlier studies (Aishwarya et al., 2022; Bruce et al., 2023) and highlights the importance of digital tools for SMEs operating in environments where traditional marketing channels are limited. The moderated regression results further reveal that talent management has both a direct positive effect on SME performance and a significant moderating effect on the relationships between strategic marketing practices and performance. The positive and significant interaction effects indicate that SMEs with effective talent management practices derive greater performance benefits from market orientation, innovation orientation, and digital marketing. This finding supports the Resource-Based View and aligns with prior studies (Ohunakin et al., 2020; Bassem, & Kayan, 2016). In the context of Niger State, effective talent management plays a critical role in translating marketing strategies into improved performance despite challenges such as skill shortages and employee turnover.

6. Conclusions and Future Work

Strategic marketing practices significantly influence SME performance in Niger State. Firms that actively engage in market orientation, innovation, and digital marketing achieve improved outcomes, including increased sales, customer satisfaction, and competitive advantage. The study highlights that talent management plays a critical moderating role, as skilled, motivated, and well-managed employees enable SMEs to translate marketing strategies into tangible performance gains. Without effective talent management, the positive effects of market orientation, innovation, and digital marketing are substantially weakened. These findings underscore that optimal SME performance is achieved through the integration of strategic marketing and robust talent management systems.

The study contributes empirically to the understanding of how human capital capabilities condition the effectiveness of strategic marketing in Nigerian SMEs. It provides actionable insights for SME owners, managers, and policymakers, emphasising the need to combine marketing initiatives with employee development and retention strategies to sustain competitiveness in dynamic business environments.

SMEs should strengthen market orientation by systematically gathering and responding to customer feedback, monitoring competitors, and sharing market information internally. Innovation culture should be promoted through creative problem-solving, investment in new technologies, and continuous process improvement, while digital marketing adoption should be expanded through social media, e-commerce, and other online tools. Investment in structured talent management, including recruitment, training, performance-based incentives, and retention strategies, is crucial to ensure marketing strategies translate into performance gains.

Policymakers should support SMEs through capacity-building programs focused on marketing and talent management, enhance digital infrastructure in rural and semi-urban areas, and provide incentives or subsidised training aimed at human capital development. Future research could expand the geographic scope beyond Niger State, employ longitudinal designs to establish causality, and explore additional moderating factors such as technological readiness, organisational culture, or financial constraints that may influence SME performance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

Isah Shamsudeen: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing–original draft.

Dauda Danlami: Data curation, Investigation, Validation, Writing–review & editing.

Sale Hadiza: Software, Data collection, Visualization, Writing–review & editing.

Shuaibu Abdullahi: Project administration, Resources, Writing–review & editing.

Madaki Safirat: Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Ethical Statements

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents after they were adequately informed about the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, with no personally identifiable information collected, and all data were used strictly for academic purposes. Participants were free to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Data and Code Availability

The data used for this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Supplementary Materials

No supplementary materials are available for this study.

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