E-MARKETING AND SALES PERFORMANCE OF FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS: LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined E-marketing and sales performance of fast-food restaurants drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. It centered on determining the relationship between E-marketing strategies (social media marketing, online reservation system and online advertising) and the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cross-sectional survey research design was adopted for the study. Primary data were obtained from 154 managers and personnel of fast-food restaurants using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics was adopted for data analysis, while hypotheses testing was carried out using Pearson' Product Moment Correlation. The findings of the study revealed that social media marketing, online reservation system and online advertising had significant positive relationships with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we recommended that in crisis situations, fast-food restaurants should leverage social media platforms, media-sharing networks, and online communities for promotional efforts, integrate online reservation systems to facilitate remote orders, and prioritize online tools such as search engines and influencers for cost-effective advertising, transcending the limitations of traditional media. On the basis of the limitations of this study, we also provided empirical implications for further research.*

KEYWORDS: E-marketing, Sales Performance, Fast-food Restaurants, COVID-19, Social Media Marketing

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian hospitality industry is among the largest tourism destinations for foreign tourists in Africa. It has been an important growth center for the Nigerian economy over the past years (Jonjon, 2021). Between 1981 and 2017, the Nigerian tourism and hospitality industry is estimated to have contributed a total of 48.96 percent variation in real gross domestic product (RGDP) to the Nigerian economy (Sanni, 2019). Domestic travel usually makes up the highest spending in the sector of travel and tourism in Nigeria. In 2020, domestic spending amounted to around 5.6 billion U.S. dollars, whereas international spending added up to 246 million U.S. dollars (Statistica, 2022). Similarly, between 2017 and 2019, the industry recorded an estimated 6,063,000,000 international inbound visitors, further boosting the revenue generated by tourism businesses in the country (Macrotrends, 2022). However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria drastically depleted the population of international inbound tourists to 321,000,000 in 2020. This was the first indication of the industry's decline as a result of the pandemic, which impacted every aspect of the industry, including hotels and restaurants. As an operational response to the pandemic, hotels and restaurants resorted to the use of E-marketing technologies to facilitate their operations and promote their offerings to customers across the country (Olaiya & Bola, 2022). While several E-marketing tools were applied by businesses at the peak of the pandemic in Nigeria, the focus of this study was on the E-marketing tools specifically applied by restaurants in the face of the pandemic, including social media marketing, online reservation system and online advertising. Since the reopening of the Nigerian hospitality industry after the nationwide lockdown, fast-food restaurants have been applying these E-marketing strategies in an innovative marketing approach designed to reinforce their operations during the pandemic.

Like every other commercial sector of the Nigerian economy, the restaurant subsector witnessed an astounding change as a consequence of the emergence and rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic advanced across Nigerian cities, the government implemented a series of emergency response plans to prevent further contagion and secure civilian population centers, including hotels and restaurants. As a result, through most of 2020 at the height of the pandemic, restaurants had to discontinue operations in response to a nationwide lockdown, which amounted to immense capital and revenue losses for restaurants (Adekoya, 2020). The inability to make sales during the pandemic plunged restaurants into lengthy economic difficulties which led to reduction in branches across the country and scores of staff retrenchments, thereby worsening the country's unemployment situation. Even after the nationwide lockdown was lifted towards the end of 2020, most Nigerians avoided visiting public places like restaurants and hotels for fear of contracting the virus and endangering their families. This further crippled the operations of physical-site restaurants, exacerbated their economic difficulties and threatened future survivability. In response, some big restaurants (such as fine-dining restaurants and fast-food franchises) with requisite resources resorted to E-marketing practices (such as social media marketing, online reservation system and online advertising) to sustain commercial operations. Those restaurants that could not tackle the pandemic were eliminated from the industry as the economic turbulence of the pandemic progressed. For those that remained, the lack of comprehensive research evidence during the pandemic has made it infeasible to determine the effectiveness of E-marketing practices on the sales performance of restaurants amidst the pandemic. To this end, this study was designed to provide verifiable empirical evidence demonstrating the relationship between E-marketing practices and the sales performance of restaurants amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the dynamic theory of innovation propounded by Taylor, Burrows and Logan (2002) and the contingency theory propounded by Chandler (1962).

Dynamic Theory of Innovation

The dynamic theory of innovation was developed by Taylor, Burrows and Logan (2002). It was developed in response to the high rate of failure experienced by conservative business organizations brought on by environmental changes and globalization (Kent, 2004). The basic assumption of the dynamic theory of innovation is that organizations exist in a dynamic environment—one that is fast moving, fast changing and fast evolving, therefore achieving sustainable competitive advantage in such a dynamic environment requires organizations to adapt, adjust and innovate in order to keep abreast of latest trends in the industry (Taylor, Burrows & Logan, 2002). The relevance of the dynamic theory of innovation to this study is that the theory was originally developed in response to the high rate of operational failures experienced by business enterprises, such as restaurants, caused by industry factors and broader environmental factors like the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the theory arose to provide an explanation as to why some conservative restaurant business enterprises were left behind as the environment evolved with time. Similarly, the dynamic theory of innovation maintains that business organizations, such as fast-food restaurants, exist in a dynamic environment, which is fast moving, fast changing and fast evolving. Hence, achieving sustainable competitive advantage (in terms of improved sales performance) in such a dynamic environment requires restaurants to adapt, adjust and innovate in order to keep abreast of latest environmental trends, such as the pandemic in the hospitality industry. It can be implied from the theory that a successful restaurant enterprise is one that is constantly in the process of adapting, adjusting and innovating its marketing strategies in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. The theory posits that restaurants, like any other organization, can adapt and innovate in four (4) ways, including technology (E-marketing), which was the central focus of this study. The theory implies that fast-food restaurants can adapt and innovate technologically using E-marketing strategies (such as social media marketing, online reservation system and online advertising) to enhance their sales performance in the Nigerian hospitality sector.

Contingency Theory

The contingency theory was developed by Chandler (1962). Its basic premise is that organizational effectiveness results from the adaptation of organizational factors, such as structure and contingencies that reflect the organizational situation, size, strategies and contingency plans. As a result, contingency plans are transforming the company as they need to be adapted to prevent productivity losses. The contingency theory argues that the organizational structure needs to be modified to fit three contingencies, namely: environment, size and strategy (Chandler, 1962). The relevance of the contingency theory to this study is that it is premised on the notion that business organizations, such as fast-food restaurants, can ensure competitiveness, business growth (improved sales performance) and sustainability during environmental uncertainties like the COVID-19 pandemic by maintaining a set of pre-designed contingency measures (such as E-marketing tools). The theory therefore implies that the sales performance of restaurant enterprises could be improved through the adaptation of organizational factors, such as structure and contingency strategies (such as E-marketing) that reflect the organizational situation, size, strategies and emergency requirements.

In that effort, the theory proposes that innovation (in this case, E-marketing) is a key contingency plan for restaurants to effectively adapt to environmental uncertainties (like the COVID-19 pandemic), because through innovative tools like E-marketing, restaurants are proactive, rather than reactive to change. The theory further suggests that innovation enables fast-food restaurants to create change or at least deliberately shape the trajectory of change; hence, environmental changes (like the prevailing pandemic) become less disruptive for their business.

E-marketing

Electronic marketing is the marketing of products and services over the internet (Shaltoni, West, Alnawas & Shatnawi, 2018). It is the application of marketing strategies, principles and techniques via electronic media and more specifically, the internet. It not only includes marketing on the internet but also includes marketing done via e-mail, wireless media and a range of technologies to help connect businesses to their customers. Electronic marketing is a set of powerful tools and methodologies used for promoting products and services through the internet (Adede, 2017). It includes a wider range of marketing elements than traditional business marketing due to the extra channels and marketing mechanisms available on the internet. According to Singh (2019), in electronic marketing, customers and prospects are targeted with the hopes of achieving profitable exchanges using electronic devices and the internet. A firm using the electronic marketing approach utilizes the internet to communicate with customers, serve their needs, build relationships with customers, and enhance organizational profitability. The main difference between conventional (traditional) marketing and electronic marketing lies in the platform through which marketing programmes and activities are executed (Taleghani, Akhlagh, Akbar & Sani, 2013). While conventional marketing utilizes conventional (traditional) platforms like radio, television, billboard, newspapers, etc., electronic marketing utilizes online platforms like websites, emails, search engine optimization, social media, etc. for planning, executing and evaluating marketing programmes and strategies.

Social Media Marketing and Sales Performance

According to Parker (2016), social media marketing is the way organizations reach their customers with information about their brand or product on the web using tools and websites that allow a conversation to take place between the organization and its target audience. It provides a virtual space where people can express and exchange opinions, disseminate and control messages, and reach out to friends or family on a daily basis. In the view of Jantsch (2012), the role of social media marketing in helping businesses is significant because it facilitates communication with customers, enabling the creation of social interactions on e-commerce sites. Even before the emergence of the Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria, social media was widely applied for marketing purposes by business organizations, especially service-based enterprises like hospitality, telecommunications and transportation. Considering its minimal costs of operation and wide user base, business organizations in Nigeria often preferred to target particular groups of customers through social media. However, as the pandemic emerged and businesses were forced to close their physical stores in compliance with government directives, the use of social media by businesses surged exponentially (Obi-Ani, Anikwenze & Isiani, 2020; Aladejebi, 2020). The preference for social media-based marketing activities by Nigerian businesses was driven by the fact that during the peak of the pandemic, the majority of residents found companionship and community on social media as physical associations were banned. Hence, Nigerian businesses sought to exploit the status quo to advance their marketing operations. From the accounts of previous researchers, it has been established that the application of

social media marketing strategy by businesses resulted in significant improvements in their sales and overall marketing performance. This premise is supported by the study by Etim, James, Nnana and Okeowo (2021), which revealed that social media marketing had a significant positive effect on the performance of SMEs in Calabar amidst the COVID-19 era. The premise also resonates with the study of Adebayo and Taiwo (2022), which revealed that the adoption of E-marketing (such as social media) by firms significantly boosts sales volume of consumer goods in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_1: *Social media marketing has a significant relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Online Reservation System and Sales Performance

An online reservation system is a software that service providers use for managing customers' booking of their services (Akihiko, Tanakana & Fujita, 2018). Abu-Faleh, Muhammad and Ismaila (2020) maintained that, basically, an online reservation system allows a potential customer to book and pay for a service directly through a website or a mobile phone. Due to the rapid advances in communication technologies, service-based businesses such as hotels, restaurants and transportation companies are integrating an online reservation system into their service offerings. Instead of braving the stress and distance to reach the physical service location of firms, the online reservation system enables customers to book for their preferred services by a click of a button within their comfort zones (Sam & Baharin, 2018). This minimizes customers' delays in accessing services and accelerates customer patronage of service companies regardless of their physical location. Online reservation system witnessed a surge in adoption by business organizations around the world at the peak of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Lau, 2020). As physical gatherings were clamped down and social distancing policies were enforced, businesses resorted to delivering their services through the internet, facilitated by an online reservation system. As a result, the logistics of getting products/services to the final consumers has drastically improved and the sales performance of companies enhanced. Restaurant enterprises have also been successful at harnessing the potential of the online reservation system to enhance their sales performance. This premise is supported by the study of Lake and Miles (2018), which revealed that the online reservation system had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fine-dining restaurants in Canada. The premise is also reinforced by the study of Gwembli and Uhuru (2021), which revealed that online reservation had a significant impact on the sales performance of fast-food restaurants in Kenya. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_2: *Online reservation system has a significant relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Online Advertising and Sales Performance

Online advertising is the non-personal and paid for presentation and promotion of goods, services and ideas using the internet as a medium by an identified sponsor (Jefferson & Hair, 2015). It is the process of using internet tools to communicate information about a firm, its products and services to specific groups of online-based users in order to enlighten, inform, educate, and persuade positive responses from customers towards a firm and its offerings. Nwokah and Ngirika (2017) maintained that given its worldwide coverage, speed, easy accessibility and cost effectiveness, the internet is fast becoming a most-preferred vehicle for the execution of marketing activities, including advertising campaigns. According to Redjeki and Affandi (2021), online advertising was one of the most

dominant marketing strategies harnessed by business organizations around the world at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As business organizations including commercial media houses were shut down or streamlined, online advertising agencies witnessed a surge in clients' demand for internet advertising campaigns across different sectors, particularly the service sector (Cathy & Stefan, 2020). Even as the pandemic situation has improved across vast parts of the world, the prominence of online advertising has continued to grow as more businesses have realized the potency of internet-based advertising campaigns. Hospitality firms, such as hotels and restaurants are among the businesses that have benefited immensely from online advertising, as it enables them to promote product and service offers to customers capable of attracting customer patronage (Mezgebe, 2020). The foregoing viewpoint suggests that online advertising could enhance customer patronage and sales performance of restaurant enterprises. This viewpoint is bolstered by the study of Abu-Faisal and Buazizi (2020), which revealed that online advertising had a significant positive effect on sales performance of Jordanian restaurant enterprises during COVID-19. The viewpoint is also buttressed by the study of Abdullah, Fattali and Emwazzi (2020), which revealed that online advertising significantly enhanced the sales performance of restaurants in the Jordanian hospitality industry. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₃: *Online advertising has a significant relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Empirical Review and Research Model Conceptualization

This unit reviews existing studies on the relationship between E-marketing and sales performance of restaurants and other business organizations in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and around the world. A study by Etim, James, Nnana and Okeowo (2021) examined E-marketing strategies and performance of small and medium-sized enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study obtained primary data from 295 operators of SMEs in Calabar, Nigeria using a structured questionnaire. Its findings revealed that social media marketing, online advertising, and email marketing had significant positive effects on the performance of SMEs in Calabar amidst the COVID-19 era. However, the limitation of this study, relative to the present research, is that it centered overwhelmingly on operators of SMEs without particular reference to restaurant enterprises. Another study by Eze and Obikeze (2017) examined the extent of utilization of E-marketing application by small and medium enterprises in South-Eastern states of Nigeria. The study used a structured questionnaire to obtain primary data from 1,473 owners/managers of SMEs across South-Eastern Nigerian states. Its findings revealed that SMEs in South-Eastern Nigeria utilized e-commerce and e-invoicing marketing applications in their operations to a low extent. The limitation of this study, in view of the current study, is that it centered overwhelmingly on SMEs in South-Eastern Nigeria and it only explains the extent of utilization of E-marketing by these organizations.

Similarly, a study by Adebayo and Taiwo (2022) examined the effect of E-marketing on sales of consumer goods in COVID-19 era. The study obtained primary data from 190 buyers of consumer goods in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria through a research questionnaire. The findings of the study, therefore, revealed that the adoption of E-marketing by firms significantly boosts sales volume of consumer goods in Ekiti State. The limitation of this study, in view of the current research, is that its scope is constrained to consumer goods in Ekiti State. Hence, the study is apparently incapable of providing substantive explanation of the influence of E-marketing strategies (such as social media marketing, online reservation system and online advertising) on the sales performance of restaurants, particularly in Calabar, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Another study by Adede, Kibera and

Owino (2017) examined electronic marketing practices, competitive environment and performance of telecommunications companies in Kenya. The study used a semi-structured questionnaire to obtain primary data from 205 customers of telecommunications companies in Kenya. Its findings revealed that e-marketing practices (online advertising, e-distribution, online marketing research, e-mail marketing, telephone marketing, digital screens and motion pictures, and interactive marketing) had a positive and significant effect on overall organizational performance in the telecommunications industry. The limitation of this study, in view of the current research, is that its scope is constrained to telecommunication companies in Kenya.

Also, a study by Egele, Ikechi and Ozo (2017) examined the impact of electronic marketing on retail outlet performance in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The study obtained primary data from 90 customers of retail outlets in Port Harcourt using a research questionnaire. Its findings revealed that e-marketing had a positive impact on retail outlet performance in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. However, this study is limited in scope to retail outlets in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Similarly, Akyüz, Isaac and Abdullahi's (2020) study examined the effect of electronic marketing on the performance of SMEs in Karu Local Government Area, Nasarawa State of Nigeria. The study obtained primary data from 400 owners/managers of SMEs in Karu Local Government Area using a structured questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed that electronic marketing had a positive and non-significant effect on the marketing performance of SMEs in Nasarawa State. However, the limitation of this study, in view of the current study, is that its scope is overwhelmingly centered on SMEs in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Furthermore, a study by Lake and Miles (2018) was carried out to assess E-marketing utilization and sales performance of Canadian fine-dining restaurants. The study obtained primary data from 252 customers at selected fine-dining restaurants in Ottawa and Vancouver using a structured online questionnaire. The study used descriptive statistics and Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient for data analysis and interpretation. Its findings revealed that E-marketing (online reservation system, social media marketing, email marketing and online advertising) had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fine-dining restaurants in Canada. However, the limitation of this study, in view of the current research, is that its scope is constrained to restaurants in Canada.

Another study by Abu-Faisal and Buazizi (2020) was centered on evaluating the effect of online advertising on marketing performance of Jordanian restaurant enterprises during COVID-19. The study used a semi-structured questionnaire to obtain primary data from 200 customers of restaurant enterprises in Amman, Jordan. The findings revealed that online advertising (search engine advertising, influencer advertising and online sponsored content) had a significant positive effect on sales performance of Jordanian restaurant enterprises during COVID-19. However, the limitation of this study, in view of the current research, is that its scope is constrained to restaurants in Jordan. In addition, a study by Harun and Farouk (2020) examined the influence of social media marketing on sales performance of restaurants in Malaysia. An online structured questionnaire was utilized to collect primary data from 283 customers at selected restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. The findings of the study therefore revealed that social media marketing (social media platforms, media-sharing networks and e-word of mouth) had a significant positive influence on the sales performance of restaurants in Malaysia. However, the limitation of this study, in view of the current research, is that its scope is constrained to restaurants in Malaysia. Also, a study by Gwembli and Uhuru (2021) centered on exploring the impact of E-marketing on sales performance of fast-food restaurants in Nairobi city, Kenya. A self-administered structured questionnaire was used to obtain primary data from 222 customers from 50 fast-food restaurants in Nairobi. Its findings revealed that E-marketing (online advertising, social media marketing and online reservation) had a significant impact on the

sales performance of fast-food restaurants in Kenya. However, the limitation of this study, in view of the current research, is that its scope is constrained to restaurants in Kenya. Finally, Abdullah, Fattali and Emwazzi (2020) carried out a study aimed at enhancing the sales performance of Jordanian restaurants amidst COVID-19 through E-marketing. The study used an online structured questionnaire to obtain primary data from 356 customers and employees of selected fine-dining restaurants in Zarqa. The findings of the study revealed that E-marketing (email marketing, telemarketing, social media marketing, and online advertising) significantly enhanced the sales performance of restaurants in the Jordanian hospitality industry. However, the limitation of this study, in view of the current research, is that its scope is constrained to restaurants in Jordan.

Informed by the findings of existing studies, this study therefore hypothesizes that there is some form of relationship between E-marketing and sales performance of restaurants in the face of COVID-19 in Nigeria. To assess this relationship, the parameters of E-marketing (online advertising, online reservation system and social media marketing) were adapted from the studies of Harun and Farouk (2020), Lake and Miles (2018), and Abu-Faisal and Buazizi (2020). Similarly, the parameters of the dependent variable, sales performance (sales volume, sales revenue, and profitability) were adapted from Edna and Wentworth (2007). The hypothesized relationship between E-marketing and sales performance in the context of this study is portrayed in the adapted conceptual model displayed in Figure 1.
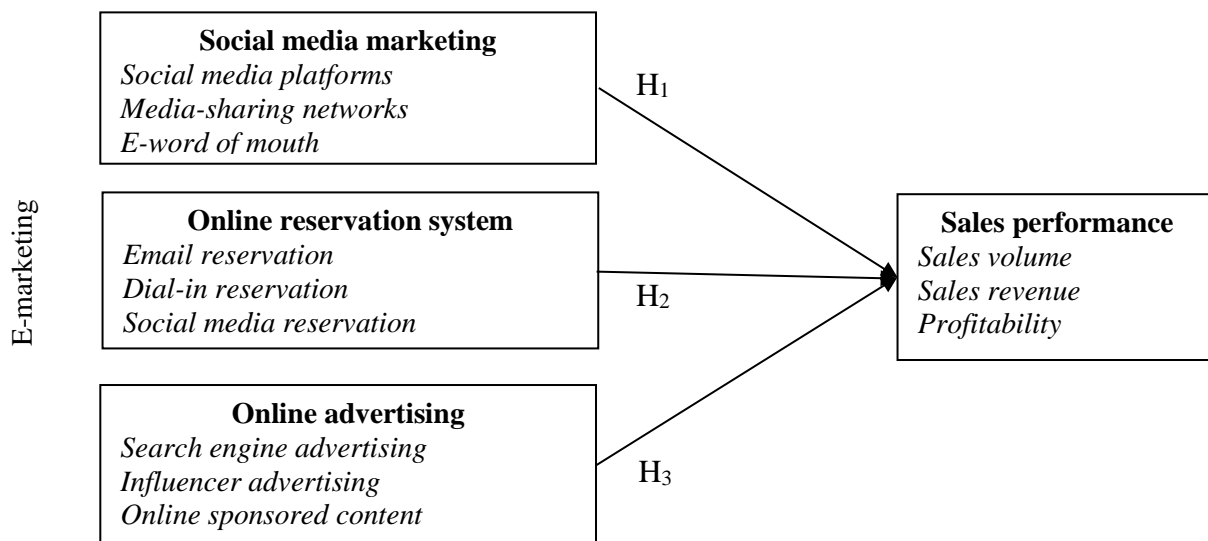

FIG. 1: Adapted conceptual model of the study.

Source: *Parameters of independent variables adapted from Harun and Farouk (2020), Lake and Miles (2018), and Abu-Faisal and Buazizi (2020). Parameters of dependent variable adapted from Edna and Wentworth (2007).*

METHODOLOGY

To achieve a detailed study of the sampled respondents, we adopted cross-sectional research design, which saved time and cut out the delays that would have accompanied a longitudinal study design. To obtain data for the study, we targeted a sample of 154 managers and personnel of selected fast-food restaurants in Nigeria. The total population sampling technique was adopted to administer copies of the questionnaire to the respondents. This entails that the research instrument adopted for the study was a structured questionnaire, with measures adapted from existing studies. The statements measuring the independent variable dimensions (social media marketing, online reservation system and online advertising) were adapted from Harun and Farouk (2020),Lake and Miles (2018), and Abu-Faisal and Buazizi (2020), whereas, the statements measuring the dependent variable (sales performance) were adapted from Edna and Wentworth (2007). Similarly, Statements 1–3 measured social media marketing, Statements 4–6 measured online reservation system, Statements 7–9 measured online advertising, while Statements 10–12 measured sales performance. The opinions of respondents were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Prior to field administration of the questionnaire, it was content-validated through authority-vetting method, while its reliability status was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha reliability approach. The results of the reliability test presented in Table 1 revealed that all measurement items on the questionnaire generated Cronbach's alpha coefficients not less than 0.7. The data obtained for the study were analyzed and interpreted using descriptive statistics, while Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was adopted for hypothesis testing.

Table 1: Summary of Reliability Results

Variables	No. of items	Alpha coefficients
Social media marketing	3	.789
Online reservation system	3	.810
Online advertising	3	.767
Sales performance	3	.850
	12	

Source: *Authors' Analysis via SPSS 2023*

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A total of 154 copies of the questionnaire were administered to managers and personnel of fast-food restaurants to obtain primary data for the study. As a consequence of the meticulousness and rigor of the researchers and the team of enumerators, all copies of the questionnaire administered were correctly filled and retrieved from respondents. The analysis was therefore based on the responses obtained from 154 respondents who participated in the questionnaire survey.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

	Item	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Remark
	Social media marketing				
1	Social media platforms	154	4.863	1.555	Accepted
2	Media-sharing networks	154	3.982	1.873	Accepted
3	E-word of mouth	154	4.156	1.628	Accepted
	Online reservation system				
4	Email reservation	154	4.291	1.998	Accepted
5	Dial-in reservation	154	3.823	1.734	Accepted
6	Social media reservation	154	4.272	1.830	Accepted
	Online advertising				
7	Search engine advertising	154	3.888	1.830	Accepted
8	Influencer advertising	154	4.812	1.777	Accepted
9	Online sponsored content	154	4.933	1.821	Accepted
	Sales performance				
10	Sales volume	154	3.832	1.998	Accepted
11	Sales revenue	154	4.256	1.832	Accepted
12	Profitability	154	4.214	1.721	Accepted

Source: *Authors' Analysis via SPSS, 2023*

Table 2 shows that the parameters of social media marketing were all accepted at a 5.00-point evaluation maximum, with 3.00 as minimum acceptable point. Mean values were 4.863, 3.982 and 4.156 respectively for social media platforms, media-sharing networks, and E-word of mouth. The data also shows that the parameters of the online reservation system were all accepted at a 5.00-point evaluation maximum, with 3.00 as the minimum acceptable point. Mean values were 4.291, 3.823 and 4.272 respectively for email reservation, dial-in reservation and social media reservation. Furthermore, on the same 5.00-point evaluation maximum and minimum acceptable point of 3.00, all the parameters of online advertising were accepted. Mean values were 3.888, 4.812 and 4.933 for search engine advertising, influencer advertising and online sponsored content respectively. Similarly, on the same evaluation scale, all the parameters of sales performance were accepted. Mean values for sales volume, sales revenue and profitability were 3.832, 4.256 and 4.214 respectively.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

Ho: Social media marketing has no significant relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Test Statistic = Pearson's product moment correlation analysis.

Decision Criteria: Accept the alternative hypothesis if (P < .05) and reject the null hypothesis if otherwise.

Table 3: Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Showing the Relationship between Social Media Marketing and the Sales Performance of Fast-food Restaurants during COVID-19

		Social media marketing	Sales performance
Social media marketing	Pearson Correlation	1	.823**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	154	154
Sales performance	Pearson Correlation	.823**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	154	154

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: *Authors' analysis via SPSS 2023*

The result on Table 3 shows the Pearson's product moment correlation of the relationship between social media marketing and the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during COVID-19. From the result above, it can be seen that each variable is perfectly correlated with itself, which is why r = 1 along the diagonal of the table. The correlation coefficient (r = 0.823) indicates that social media marketing had an 82.3 percent relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a very strong degree of relationship. Also, since there is no negative sign (-) in front of the correlation coefficient (r = 0.823), it indicates that the relationship between the study variables (social media marketing and sales performance) is a positive one. This implies that as social media marketing activities are increased by fast-food restaurants, so is their sales performance. Furthermore, the table also shows that the probability value (0.000) is less than the error margin of 0.05; hence, we reject the null hypothesis, accept the alternative hypothesis and conclude that social media marketing had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hypothesis Two

Ho: Online reservation system has no significant relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Test Statistic = Pearson's product moment correlation analysis.

Decision Criteria: Accept the alternative hypothesis if (P < .05) and reject the null hypothesis if otherwise.

Table 4: Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Showing the Relationship between Online Reservation System and the Sales Performance of Fast-food Restaurants during COVID-19

		Online reservation system	Sales performance
Online reservation system	Pearson Correlation	1	.325[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	154	154
Sales performance	Pearson Correlation	.325[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	154	154
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Source: *Authors' analysis via SPSS 2023*

The result on Table 4 shows the Pearson's product moment correlation of the relationship between online reservation system and the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during COVID-19. From the result above, it can be seen that each variable is perfectly correlated with itself, which is why r = 1 along the diagonal of the table. The correlation coefficient (r = 0.325) indicates that online reservation system had a 32.5 percent relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a fairly weak degree of relationship. Also, since there is no negative sign (-) in front of the correlation coefficient (r = 0.325), it indicates that the relationship between the study variables (online reservation system and sales performance) is a positive one. This implies that as more online reservation systems are adopted by fast-food restaurants, so will their sales performance also increase. Furthermore, the table also shows that the probability value (0.000) is less than the error margin of 0.05; hence, we reject the null hypothesis, accept the alternative hypothesis and conclude that online reservation system had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hypothesis Three

Ho: Online advertising has no significant relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Test Statistic = Pearson's product moment correlation analysis.

Decision Criteria: Accept the alternative hypothesis if (P < .05) and reject the null hypothesis, if otherwise.

Table 5: Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Showing the Relationship between Online Advertising and the Sales Performance of Fast-food Restaurants during COVID-19

		Online advertising	Sales performance
Online advertising	Pearson Correlation	1	.406[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	154	154
Sales performance	Pearson Correlation	.406[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	154	154
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Source: Authors' analysis via SPSS 2023

The result on Table 5 shows the Pearson's product moment correlation of the relationship between online advertising and the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during COVID-19. From the result above, it can be seen that each variable is perfectly correlated with itself, which is why r = 1 along the diagonal of the table. The correlation coefficient (r = 0.406) indicates that online advertising had a 40.6 percent relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a fairly weak degree of relationship. Also, since there is no negative sign (-) in front of the correlation coefficient (r = 0.406), it indicates that the relationship between the study variables (online advertising and sales performance) is a positive one. This implies that an increase in the use of online advertising by fast-food restaurants will lead to a corresponding increase in their sales performance. Furthermore, the table also shows that the probability value (0.000) is less than the error margin of 0.05; hence, we reject the null hypothesis, accept the alternative hypothesis and conclude that online advertising had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the test of Hypothesis One, it was revealed that social media marketing had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship between social media marketing and sales performance was also confirmed in the study of Etim *et al.* (2021), which revealed that social media marketing had a significant positive effect on the performance of SMEs in Calabar amidst the COVID-19 era. The relationship was also confirmed by the study of Adebayo and Taiwo (2022), which revealed that the adoption of E-marketing (such as social media) by firms significantly boosts sales volume of consumer goods in Ekiti State, Nigeria. This finding implies that during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, fast-food restaurants were able to stay operational and improve their sales performance by adopting social media to facilitate marketing operations.

The test of Hypothesis Two revealed that the online reservation system had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship between online reservation system and sales performance was also confirmed by the study of Lake and Miles (2018), which revealed that online reservation system had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fine-dining restaurants in Canada. The relationship was also reinforced by the study of Gwembli and Uhuru (2021), which revealed that online reservation had a significant impact on the sales performance of fast-food restaurants in Kenya. The implication of this finding, in the context of this study, is that as the COVID-19 pandemic surged in Nigeria, fast-food restaurants took advantage of the online reservation system to enable customers make orders for products, which improved their sales performance.

Finally, the test of Hypothesis Three revealed that online advertising had a significant positive relationship with the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship between online advertising and sales performance has been confirmed in prior studies, such as the study of Abu-Faisal and Buazizi (2020), which revealed that online advertising had a significant positive effect on sales performance of Jordanian restaurant enterprises during COVID-19. The relationship between the variables is also supported by the study of Abdullah, Fattali and Emwazzi (2020), which revealed that online advertising significantly enhanced the sales

performance of restaurants in the Jordanian hospitality industry. The implication of this finding, in the context of this study, is that during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, fast-food restaurants were able to maintain great sales performance by using internet tools like websites and mobile connections to advertise products to customers. On the basis of this finding, the study concludes that E-marketing is a substantially-crucial marketing strategy capable of reinforcing the sales performance of fast-food restaurants during crisis periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In light of the findings made in this study, we recommend that in crisis situations, where human movements and activities are impeded, fast-food restaurants should take advantage of social media platforms, media-sharing networks and social media communities to promote their services in order to attract customer patronage. We also recommend that instead of being limited to traditional on-store reservations, fast-food restaurants should fully integrate online reservation systems into their service delivery to ensure that customers can obtain their orders remotely without the inconvenience of locating physical stores. In addition, we recommend that fast-food restaurants should intensify the use of online tools like search engines, online influencers and websites to advertise their products especially during crisis periods to minimize the costs and coverage limitations of conventional media like television and radio.

We have also made suggestions for further research considering the limitations of the present study. We recognize that this research was limited in scope to Nigeria; as such, its empirical insights may be restricted to this region. We suggest that similar studies should be carried out by researchers in other developing countries in order to provide a strong basis for the empirical generalization. Also, there is a need for comprehensive studies on more E-marketing platforms (other than social media marketing, online reservation system and online advertising) in order to provide new insights into the roles of E-marketing technologies in reinforcing fast-food restaurants around the world against future crises like COVID-19.

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