

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE MARKETING PRACTICES, DIGITAL INFLUENCERS MARKETING PRACTICES AND EMPLOYERS' EXPECTATION FROM MARKETING EDUCATION GRADUATES

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the interplay between artificial intelligence (AI) marketing practices, digital influencers marketing practices and employers' expectation of marketing educators' graduates' in universities in Cross River State. The study adopted a correlation research design. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the study. The population of this study comprised all the managers of medium scale enterprises in Cross River State, Nigeria. There are Two Hundred and Ten (210) medium scale businesses in Cross River State. The population of the study is manageable and there were no sampling procedures employed. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire, titled: "AI Marketing Practices, Digital Influencers Marketing Practices and Employers' Expectation of Marketing Education Graduates". The instrument was validated by five experts, three from Business Education and two from Measurement and Evaluation. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach Alpha, yielding the reliability coefficient of 0.80. The research questions and the null hypotheses were tested using linear regression. The study found that there are relationships between AI marketing practices, digital influencers marketing practices and employers' expectation of marketing educators' graduates' in universities in Cross River State.

Keywords: *AI Marketing Practices, Cross River State, Employers' Expectation, Marketing Education Graduates, Digital Influencers Marketing.*

Introduction

The emergence of marketing as a business practice focuses on the importance of having a profound appreciation for the customer so that the marketer can match or surpass the needs of the intended customer better than the competition and as a result provide the organization with a sustainable competitive advantage. In recent years, companies have begun to use social media platforms to market products and services due to the advantages they offer regarding interactivity, accessibility and efficiency. In the same vein, Marketing education is all about learning how to use the marketing process to take an idea and bring it to the consumer (Deskera, 2022). Contextually, marketing education is a program that trains both secondary and post-secondary learners to conduct vital business operations that are linked to the flow of products and services from producers to consumers. Not only is this unit important to students preparing for careers in the marketing field, but it is also an essential program for all individuals set to join any workforce.

Alauthaman, Aslam, Zhang, Alasem and Hossain, (2018) observed that many businesses are looking for tailored learning interventions to help them build specific skill sets, insights, and competencies that are crucial to driving their firms' capabilities, where learning is smoothly linked with marketing. These shifts usher in a new geostrategic world order, posing new problems for business schools, such as the need to adjust curricula to quickly changing circumstances if they are to successfully train the next generation of marketing executives to acquaint them with modern practices (Leung, Gu & Palmatier, 2022). Similarly, Steimer, (2019) maintained that marketing practices are defined in terms of marketing capabilities, competencies, efficiency, strategies and marketing orientation. Alaba (2011) asserted that marketing practices are procedures by which firms react to situations of market and internal forces that enable firms to achieve their goals and objectives in their target markets through product, price, place and promotion decisions. Leung et al. (2022) contended that marketing practices comprises the firm's management of the marketing mix variables, the value of its market research, the appropriateness of its positioning strategies and the nature of its marketing goals. Nascent marketing practices have been gestating in many studies. In this study, marketing practices is conceptualized by drawing on the theoretically derived classification scheme that delineates three aspects of marketing practices: artificial intelligence marketing, online digital influencers marketing and internet ads marketing. However, the shift in communication streams is also obvious here. Northern Colorado Business Report (2013) revealed that today's public relations in marketing is not about communicating with editors or broadcasters, but more likely with emerging practices like artificial intelligence and online digital influencers, this time has been called the "Golden-Age" of artificial intelligence.

The evolution of big data and advanced analytic solutions have made it possible for marketers to build a clearer picture of their target audiences than ever before; and in this hotbed of advancement lies artificial intelligence (AI) marketing. Using data and customer profiles, AI tools learn how to communicate with customers, and deliver personalized messaging at the right time without the need for human intervention or assistance from marketing team members. Okoye (2020) defined AI Marketing as a method of leveraging customer data and AI concepts like machine learning to anticipate customer's next move and improve the customer journey. Steimer (2019) defined AI marketing as integrating intelligent and learning systems that use data and experience, to improve the marketing process of identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements. Armed with big data insights, digital marketers can greatly boost their campaigns' performance and returns on investment (ROI), all of which can be achieved with essentially no extra effort on the marketer's part. According to Martin, Linden and Warin (2020), there are a few key elements that make the adoption of AI marketing as important as it is today, including big data, machine learning, and the right solutions.

Big data is a pretty straightforward concept. It refers to a marketer's ability to aggregate and segment large sets of data with minimal manual work. Marketing teams can then use this data to ensure the right message is being delivered to the right person at the right time, via their channel of choice. Machine learning platforms come in handy when marketers try to make sense of this huge data repository. They can help identify trends or common occurrences and effectively predict common insights, responses, and reactions so marketers can understand the root cause and likelihood of certain actions repeating. Powerful. AI marketing solutions truly understand the world in the same way a human would (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). This means that the platforms can identify insightful concepts and themes across huge data sets, incredibly fast. AI solutions also interpret emotion and communication like a human, which makes these platforms able to understand open form content like social media, natural language, and email responses. AI marketing has been gaining more attention among marketers because of the insights it provides. According to a recent study of Marketing Evolution (2022), 72% marketers view AI as a "business advantage. There are a lot of benefits to integrating AI in marketing, such as gaining AI-powered customer insights or producing customized content. More so, there are indirect ways digital marketers use artificial intelligence marketing solutions

to benefit their business, like reducing human mistakes or improving workflow efficiency (Crider, 2022). Along with the increasingly high level of digital media consumption, organizations' expenditure on online promotional activities is constantly and dynamically growing. Therefore, in the new market situation, when the promotion of products and services has never been so difficult, organizations have started to look for other methods of influencing consumers. One of the most important trends is the use of the digital online influencer marketing concept.

Digital influencers according to Barker (2018) are opinion leaders, mediating in the distribution of information and facilitating its dissemination to their online followers. As a result, they are spokespersons or ambassadors for their brands (Abdar, & Al-Ebraheemy, 2020). Organizations use them to support traditional marketing activities, and to generate a multiplier effect based on electronic word of mouth, playing an important role in building a 'digital relationship' with their clients (Bhatia, Yusuf, Gill, Shepherd, Kranz & Nannra, 2019). In today's market conditions, they perceive the digital relationship as an extremely important factor. As far as the influencer notion is concerned, this type of content is created, inter alia, as a result of the increasing spread of the celebrity culture. According to Brennan, (2019), digital influencers are persons respected in their communities, who have a large group of committed supporters and audience. Digital influencers very often create their own specific content (user-generated content to build their reputation are considered experts in their communities. According to Breves et al. (2019), digital influencers are powerful human brands that positively impact the performance of companies associated with them. With respect to the use of the Internet, they are referred to as digital influencers. Influencers perceived in this way are defined as any type of person who publishes online contents and who has a significant number of online followers (Abid, Mohd, Mohd, Ravi & Rajiv, 2022).

An influencer is an opinion leader, popular in a wider or higher group of regular recipients, who, with his or her credible actions currently conducted more and more often on the Internet and inspires trust, engages and convinces the addressees of his or her communication to make specific choices, such as those related to shopping, nutrition or worldview. In the context of their use of social media, they are referred to as social media influencers. Influencers are a type of micro-celebrity who have accrued a large number of followers on social media and frequently use this social capital to gain access to financial resources. The last few years have been period in which organizations have become strongly interested in the use of digital influencers in their marketing activities, and have allocated more of their promotional budgets to this form of activity.

Social media influencers can be classified according to several categories; however, the most common is differentiating between the size of the network. One differentiates between mega-influencers, macro- influencers and micro-influencers (Jain, Shah & Ganesh, 2018). All social media influencers possess a dense network with a solid reach (being able to produce and communicate relevant content), relevance (how strong the influencer's content is connected to a topic or brand) and resonance (ability to cause a certain behavior from the followers). However, the extent of these three factors differs between the three types of influencers: Mega-influencers are typically celebrities like actors and artists, sportsmen or social media stars that show a following above 1 million subscribers (Abid et al., 2022). Mega-influencers are typically celebrities that enjoy a variety of different follower groups. If the celebrity promotes a certain product on his social media channels (such as, sports clothing), a broad range of target groups are approached, which may not show an interest in sports clothing. Hence mega-influencers reach a high number of people. However, the chances that they reach out to the target group which is interested in a special topic, is lower than with micro-influencers (Boone, 2017). Micro-Influencers are widely overlooked due to their low number of followers. However, studies could show that this type of influencer can be highly valuable for companies and more agencies seem to start valuing the influence of micro accounts (Boone, 2017). An account between 500-10.000 followers can be seen as a small account. Micro-influencers tend to have the highest brand relevance and resonance, encouraging 25-30% engagement per post (Xiao, Wang &

Chan-Olmsted, 2018). This can be explained by the fact that micro- influencers are known to have faithful and topic-affine followers, which makes them more trustworthy than bigger accounts (Brown, 2020).

Micro-influencers use their personal experience with a brand and their strong relational network in order to exert their influence. The follower groups of influencers below 10,000 subscribers are likely to consist of family and friends, which increases the trust factor of the influencer (Barker, 2018). One can say that the opinion of these influencers is crucial to their audience, which makes them highly valuable. However, the reason macro or mega influencers are still preferred by companies is that micro-influencers do not have the reach companies wish to see, in order to have the same reach like bigger accounts, it would take multiple micro-influencers, which requires several resources and time (Davari, Arezoo, Pramod Iyer & Guzmán, 2017). Nevertheless, one can see that the “optimal” influencer in theory has a follower group between 10.000 and 100.000 followers in order to manage a successful combination between high engagement and sufficient reach (Davis, Brennan, Ozanne & Ronald, 2016).

In Cross River State, Nigeria, universities play a crucial role in preparing marketing educators for the workforce. However, there is a growing concern about whether the curriculum and training provided by these institutions meet the expectations of employers in today’s competitive business environment. Employers increasingly demand graduates who are proficient in digital marketing tools, analytics, communication strategies, and customer engagement techniques. By identifying key competencies required in the job market, this research aims to provide insights that will bridge the gap between academia and industry, ensuring that marketing graduates are better equipped for the evolving business landscape.

Research Justification

The world needs good business leaders, who are aware of what is going on in the world of marketing to promote business activities, engaged in wanting to make a difference, and act with humility and humanity. This places a burden on the business education programme to be the vanguard for bringing about changes in the global marketing environment. Because the main aim of marketing education as one of the programme areas in business education as a vocational education programme is to equip recipients with relevant marketing practices including business skills in order to make them relevant to the business world as employees or self-employed graduates. Today, higher educational institutes are facing different challenges to equip graduates with correct competencies and attitudes required in the marketing space and corporate world. On the other hand, most business schools follow a traditional approach while designing the curriculum following a stereotype approach as advocated by the western business schools. In fact, the contemporary approach should be to identify the attributes and levels on knowledge, skills and attitudes before reviewing changes in the curriculum to develop a graduate with right combination of these practices to satisfy the “all round person” desired by the marketing and corporate world. In the global era where every year thousands of marketing education graduates are entering the market, employers are seeking for the appropriate talent. Only those graduates who have an edge in skills and competencies for the current job market would be successful. It is observed that the employers are unable to find fresh graduates with the required skills and emerging practices. The research focuses on only those practices which are expected by the employers. Thus in Nigeria today, just as in most developing countries of the world some organization and institutions are engaging in marketing practices either as a result of low volume of patronage or low profit maximization. In addition, the 21st century marketing is characterized with different practices some of which are technology empowered customers who are contacted and won over by business through the utilization of marketing practices and applications. However, a situation where most courses in business education including marketing are still taught theoretically without recourse to practical sections, makes one wonder whether the students of this programme can acquire the requisite practices in marketing to meet up with demand of the 21st century business world. A gap analysis has

been conducted against the expected practices and current performance of the newly employed graduates to determine the extent of relationship.

Purpose of the Study

Specifically, the study seeks to examine:

1. the relationship between AI marketing and employers' expectation of marketing education graduates
2. the relationship between digital influencers marketing practices and employers' expectation of marketing education graduates.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

Research Question 1: To what extent does AI marketing practices relate with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates?

Research Question 2: To what extent does digital influencer marketing practices relate with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates?

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were formed to guide the study.

Research Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between AI marketing practices and employers' expectation of marketing education graduates.

Research Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between digital influencer marketing practices and employers' expectation of marketing education graduates.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between nascent marketing practices and employers' expectations of marketing education graduates. Bhandari (2021) described a correlational research as a design that evaluate relationships between two variables using statistical analysis. Similarly, Cherry and Swaim (2022) described a correlational research as a design that investigate relationships between two or more variables without manipulation or control by the researcher. Therefore, this design was chosen because it allows the study to analyze the relationship between marketing education and employer expectations without altering any variables.

Population and Sampling Procedure

The population of the study comprised all human resource managers of medium-scale enterprises in Cross River State. According to data from the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), there are 210 registered medium-scale businesses in the state. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, ensuring that only HR managers who directly engage with marketing education graduates were included in the study. This approach helped to obtain relevant and reliable data concerning employer expectations.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire, titled: "AI Marketing Practices, Digital Influencers Marketing Practices and Employers' Expectation of Marketing Education Graduates". The questionnaire was structured into four sections: Section 1: Personal data (e.g., gender, years of working experience). Sections 2–4: Questions designed to address the study's specific objectives. Responses were measured using a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A),

Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)

Validation and Reliability of Instrument

To ensure validity, the structured questionnaire was reviewed and validated by five experts, two from measurement and evaluation and three from the Department of Business Education, all from University of Calabar. Their feedback helped refine the instrument for clarity, relevance, and accuracy. To ensure reliability, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of HR managers in Uyo, Akwa-Ibom State who were not part of the main study. The results were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding the reliability coefficient of 0.80. Ensuring that the instrument produced consistent and reliable responses.

Procedure for Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered personally by the author, with the help of two trained research assistants. These research assistants were briefed on the study's objectives and the importance of accurate data collection. Their role was to distribute, monitor, and collect the questionnaires, ensuring a high response rate. Personal contact helped improve participation and reduced the likelihood of missing responses.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 27.0). The study utilized the linear regression to analyze relationships between variables. In the case of a linear regression, a significant value less than or equal to .05 indicates a significant result (reject hypothesis), whereas significant value greater than .05 indicates a non-significant result (accept hypothesis).

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does AI marketing practices relate with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates?

Table 1: Linear Regression Analysis on the Extent to which AI Marketing Practices Relates with Employers' Expectation of Marketing Education Graduates.

r	r²	SE
.629	.395	.52

Note. SE = Standard Error

Table 1 shows that AI marketing moderately relates with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates with a regression coefficient of $r = 0.629$, which indicates a positive moderate relationship. The coefficient of determination of $r^2 = 0.395$ indicates that 39.5% of the variance of employers' expectation of marketing education graduates were determined by AI marketing practices in an organization.

Research Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between AI marketing practices and employers' expectation of marketing education graduates.

Table 2: Analysis of Variance on the Relationship Between AI and Employers' Expectation of Marketing Education Graduates.

Variation	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	12.035	1	12.035	43.775	.000 ^b
Residual	18.420	207	.275		
Total	30.455	208			

Note. SS = Sum of Square, MS = Mean Square

Table 2 reveals that $F(1, 207) = 43.775$; $p = 0.000 < 0.05$. The calculated p-value (0.000) is less than the level of significant (0.05). This leads to the rejection of the null hypotheses, which states that there is no significant relationship between AI marketing practices and employers' expectation of marketing education graduates. This also indicates that AI marketing practices has a positive relationship with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates.

Research Question 2: To what extent does digital influencers marketing practices relate with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates?

Table 3: Linear Regression Analysis of the Extent to which Digital Influencers Marketing Relates with Employers' Expectation of Marketing Education Graduates.

r	r ²	SE
.719	.516	.47

Note. SE = Standard Error

Table 3 shows that digital influencers marketing highly relates with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates, with a regression coefficient of $r = 0.719$, which indicates a high positive relationship. The coefficient of determination of $r^2 = 0.516$ indicates that 51.6% of the variance of employers' expectation of marketing education graduates were determined by the digital influencers marketing practices of an organization.

Research Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between digital influencers marketing practices and employers' expectation of marketing education graduates.

Table 4: Analysis of Variance on the Relationship Between Digital Influencers Marketing and Employers' Expectation of Marketing Education Graduates.

Variation	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	15.729	1	15.729	71.561	.000 ^b
Residual	14.726	207	.220		
Total	30.455	208			

Note. SS = Sum of Square, MS = Mean Square

Table 4 reveals that $F(1, 207) = 71.561$; $p = 0.000 < 0.05$. The calculated p-value (0.000) is less than the level of significant (0.05). This leads to the rejection of the null hypotheses, which states that there is no significant relationship between digital influencers marketing and employers' expectation of marketing education graduates. This also indicates that digital influencers marketing has positive relationship with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates.

Discussion

The study found that AI marketing has a significant moderate positive relationship with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates. This finding conforms to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported who noted that greater exposure to AI was associated with higher level of employment in occupations where the use of computer is high. This suggests that workers who have higher level of digital skills may have a greater ability to adapt to and use AI at work and hence reap the benefits that these technologies bring. In addition, Steimer (2019) found that marketing was the domain where AI would contribute the greatest value. In agreement with the above findings, Chief marketing officers are increasingly embracing the technology. An August 2019 survey by the American Marketing Association revealed that the implementation of AI had

jumped 27% in the previous year and a half (Chu, Wang, & Huang, 2020). The study also found that digital influencers marketing highly relates with employers' expectation of marketing education graduates. It also found that this relationship is statistically positive. This study is in line with Wu & Huang (2021) who found that online influencer marketing leverages influencers' resources to enhance a firm's marketing communication effectiveness. In alliance to the above findings, Leung, Gu & Palmatier, (2022) found that social media influencers have a significant impact on consumers' purchase intentions and that their influence is moderated by consumers' perceived value and trust.

Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence has made leaps and bounds since a long time ago, and it already shapes the future of marketing. There is no better time for marketers to begin testing how Artificial Intelligence strategies can help create highly personalized experiences for their consumers. With AI poised to continue growing across all industries and segments, marketers should dedicate time and resources to experiment with strategies and ensure their marketing organization is set up for continued success, both now and in the future. The AI-based applications have a promising future and they will create a very positive impact on marketing in terms of efficiency, customer satisfaction, speed, problem-solving and decision making. This in turn will enhance brand loyalty and generate hefty revenues for businesses. Also, online Influencers marketing focuses on using social media influencers to drive a brand's message and reach a target market. Influencers are those individuals who have built a large social media following and who are perceived as trusted and influential in one or several niche markets. The spread of the internet and the rise of social media users worldwide have made influencers marketing the logical next step of digital marketing. Advances in social media have created a new platform for experiential marketing. Online influencers seem as perfect tools to be used in experiential marketing. Companies send free samples to the online influencers to use, like and recommend them to their followers. By this way, consumers are supposed to experience the product through influencers. When the influencers use the product, followers may experience the usage of the product.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the studies the following recommendation were made:

1. Government and other stakeholders should endeavor to ensure that they give marketing education programme the needed attention and skilled personnel.
2. Marketing educators should endeavor to embark on personal development programme aimed at improving their knowledge and skills on emerging marketing practices.
3. Institutional management should endeavor to organize training and retraining in emerging marketing practices to continually improve the competencies lecturers and students in emerging marketing practices.
4. Marketing educators should endeavor to try and increase their interest in searching for emerging marketing practices
5. Institutional management should endeavor to collaborate with managers of small and medium scale enterprise on the extent of acquisition of emerging marketing practices.

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