

Strategic Importance of Information and Communication Technology to the Survival of Small and Medium Scale Enterprise (SME) In Nigeria during the Covid-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus (Covid19) epidemic has wreaked havoc on the global economy and businesses, with many unsure whether they can continue to operate. Companies face a wide range of issues as a result of these disruptions, and many are experiencing financial difficulties. Many businesses have had to lay off employees, while others have had to restrict working hours. Due to the fall in production volumes and the tough market conditions, SMEs are battling to avoid bankruptcy. Many markets, particularly in hospitality and tourism, have vanished, while internet buying, communication, and entertainment have experienced tremendous expansion.

This paper examines the role of ICT in the survival of SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lagos State, Nigeria. Three major clusters of SMEs were identified in Lagos; Otigba IT SME Cluster, Oko-Oba Agro-Allied SME clusters and Alaba consumer electronic Cluster. 163 registered SME owners were identified as population size and a sample size of 115 was drawn as respondents. The study used mainly primary data assembled from interviews, questionnaires and surveys. Secondary data was derived from previous researched literatures and books.

The findings of the research were analyzed using the SPSS tool and presented in form of discussion tables and charts. Overall, the findings of the research revealed that the use of ICT has significantly helped the survival of SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic as there was unprecedented growth in the use of Internets for; communication with customers and suppliers, accessing online merchant platforms, social media advertising and networking.

Keywords: COVID-19, Small Medium Enterprises (SME), Survival. ICT.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 Pandemic was one of the most significant events in contemporary history. It extended to over 216 countries and territories worldwide, causing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression (World Health Organization, 2020). Covid-19 was initially discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and has since spread to almost every country on the planet (Akanni and Gabriel, 2020). According to WHO (2020), as of Dec, 3, 2020, 4.37pm (CET), the total number of confirmed cases worldwide was 63,965,092, while there were 1,488,120 confirmed deaths. As of 4th of Dec 2020, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) reported 63,303 cases, 1,179 deaths. No company was likely to have prepared for COVID-19, irrespective of business size. According to Igwe (2020), the world economy is experiencing its worst ever economic recession as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Because the Pandemic is still ongoing, estimating its long-term economic, behavioral, or societal repercussions is difficult. The coronavirus pandemic is producing a global health crisis as well as a downturn in the economy. The crisis has a negative influence on investment, employment, trade, and economic growth, and it is bound to sabotage a country's financial goals. Stakeholders are increasingly concerned about the implications for Nigeria's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). As the health-centered response to Coronavirus grows, it is becoming increasingly evident that SMEs in Nigeria will encounter substantial challenges in their operations, ranging from increased production and distribution costs to supply chain pressures. COVID-19's impact on businesses will remain longer than predicted, even if it eventually fades away.

Managing Small Businesses in Nigeria during the Covid-19 Crisis has posed significant hurdles for Small and Medium scale enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are critical to any economy's effective operation because they ensure that items are supplied during and after public emergencies (Burton, Confield, Gasner, and Weisfuse, 2011). SMEs are a powerful engine of economic growth and productivity, as well as a source of

empowerment and wealth distribution. SMEs are viewed as the most attractive components of the economy in many emerging markets. With 43.98 million internet users, Nigeria is the fastest growing communications market or country in Africa, according to Ayo et al, (2011). This equates to 29.5 percent of Nigeria's total population. This number is projected to rise as communications firms expand and ISPs (Internet Service Providers) packages become more affordable.

SMEs must do more than just have an online presence to be successful. It's no longer enough to have a cellphone, a website, or an email address. These technologies must enable the small business owner to connect with customers in a smart and cost-effective manner. While some SME owners still prefer traditional methods of doing business, such as face-to-face interaction, it is undeniable that this was not possible during the Covid 19 pandemic era, when Nigeria was under total lockdown at one point and for a long time, and the public was discouraged from physical contact by the NCDC. ICT adoption is critical for SMEs since it has emerged as a key catalyst and enabler of organizational change (Hazbo et al, 2008).

Information and communication technology (ICT) has become critical to the survival, expansion, and development of small and medium businesses around the world, including in Nigeria. In today's society, ICT skills are required for involvement and engagement. Telecommunications advancements have had a significant impact on ICT applications and usage.

ICT may thus play a critical role in assisting SMEs in developing new business prospects and combating competitive challenges. Appropriate ICT can assist SMEs in reducing costs by improving internal processes, improving their product through faster communication with clients, and better promoting and distributing their products via an online presence.

ICT is a fundamental ingredient for globalization. It is against this backdrop that the study seeks to investigate the role of ICT on the survival of SME operators in Nigeria during the COVID 19 era.

1.1 Situation of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria.

On February 27, 2020, the first confirmed case in Nigeria was disclosed when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. On March 9, 2020, a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen was diagnosed with the virus in Ewekoro, Ogun State. Since then, the number of cases in Nigeria has increased, with Lagos originally serving as the epicenter of the pandemic. Borders have been closed, lockdowns have been implemented, interstate movement has been prohibited, and non-essential workplaces, clubs, and businesses have been closed. Low economic activity, particularly in the oil and gas industry, trade and manufacturing, as well as services, has had a substantial impact on government revenue, prompting the Federal Government to reduce the budget for 2020 by more than N71 billion. COVID-19 has unquestionably effected on every part of our life.

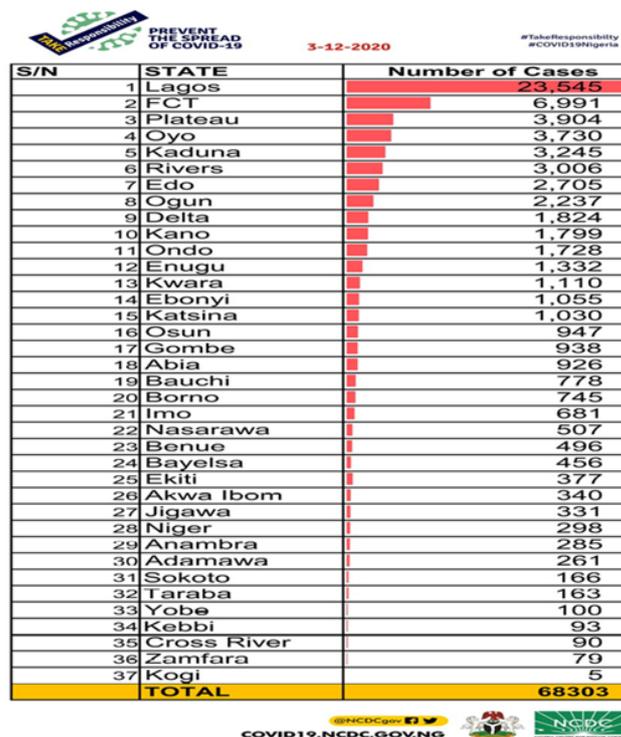


FIGURE 1: COVID-19 Situation in Nigeria as at 3rd of December 2020.

1.2 Covid -19: Spill over to the Nigerian Economy

The COVID-19 epidemic spilled over into Nigeria in five major ways, according to KPMG (2020). One, the COVID-19 epidemic impacted borrowers' ability to service their loans, resulting in non-performing loans (NPLs), which lowered bank profitability and subsequently jeopardized the viability and stability of institutions. As a result, banks were hesitant to issue new loans to borrowers as more and more borrowers struggled to repay the debts they had received during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two, there were oil demand shocks, which resulted in a precipitous drop in oil prices.

The most noticeable and immediate consequence was a decline in crude oil prices, which fell from about \$60 per barrel to as low as \$30 per barrel in March. People stopped traveling during the pandemic, which resulted in a continuous drop in demand for aviation and automotive fuel, affecting Nigeria's net oil earnings and, subsequently, its foreign reserve.

Three, there were supply disruptions in the globalized economy, as many importers, particularly in China, closed their facilities and closed their borders. Nigeria was badly impacted because it is an import-dependent economy, and as a result, critical supplies such as medicinal supplies, spare parts, and finished items from China were in short supply. Finally, the national budget was impacted. The budget was created with an oil price of \$57 per barrel in mind. The budget became obsolete as oil prices fell to \$30 per barrel during the pandemic, and a new budget had to be created, which had to be re-priced with the drop in oil prices.

Finally, the Nigerian stock market was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. When investors withdrew their money from so-called safe havens like US Treasury bonds, major stock market indices plummeted. From January 2nd through April 16th, 2020, Adenomon and Maijamaa (2020) investigated the influence of COVID-19 on the Nigerian stock exchange, the results demonstrated a decline in stock returns and excessive volatility in stock returns. On January 28, 2020, just three weeks after the first incidence of coronavirus was identified and published in Nigeria, stock market investors lost about NGN2.3 trillion (US\$5.9 billion).

1.3 COVID-19 and SMEs in Nigeria

1.3.1 Nigeria SME Overview

The definition of a small business varies by country, although it is frequently based on employment, assets, or a mix of the two. According to Onugu (2002), SMEs have been characterized based on a variety of parameters, including the value of assets employed and the consumption of energy. National Council of Industries refers to SMEs as business enterprises whose total costs, excluding land, are not more than two hundred million naira ₦200million (€912,813,22; Onugu, (2002). However, the Small and Medium Sized Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) defines SMEs based on the following criteria: a micro enterprise as a business with less than 10 people with an annual turnover of less than ₦5,000,000.00 (€ 22,896,35); a small enterprise as a business with 10-49 people with an annual turnover of ₦5 to ₦49,000,000.00(€228,469,28); and a medium enterprise as a business with 50-199 people with an annual turnover of ₦50 to ₦499,000,000.00(€228,469,28)

1.3.2 Role and Importance of SME in Nigeria

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have been the engine of global economic development and growth, and SMEs, in particular, have made significant contributions to economic progress in developing nations, including Nigeria. SME's (Small and Medium Enterprises) are celebrated in almost every country and state. SMEs have been rightly referred to as the engine of growth and catalysts for socioeconomic transformation of any country due to their vital involvement in the development and growth of diverse economies (Basil, et al 2005). As a result, Bryujolfsson and Hitt (2010) concur that SMEs not only help to raise people's living standards, but also help to create significant local capital and reach high levels of productivity and capacity.

According to Staley and Morse, (1965) small scale industries make the following contributions:

Economic Efficiency: Small-scale industries allow idle resources such as labor, capital, and raw materials to be tapped.

i. Improving the Industrial System's Efficiency: Small-scale industries have a lower capital or labor ration, which means they are more labor-intensive, which helps to utilize idle hands and resources that would otherwise be idle.

ii. Entrepreneurial and managerial development: Small-scale industries serve as hatcheries for aspiring entrepreneurs and managers.

iii. Human and Material Capital Formation: Small-scale industries contribute significantly to the production of wealth and the development of personnel in the economy.

iv. Capital Savings: They assist in the accumulation of investible funds in the form of savings. Iv. Employment: In any economy, small-scale industries employ a significant portion of the working population.

v. Geographical Distribution of Development: Many small-scale industries are dispersed around the country due to their nature. As a result, they contribute to rural development.

Socio-Political Development: Small scale industries contribute to increase the standard of living of the people and to stop rural-urban migration, which could otherwise endanger political stability, by providing work opportunities for the great majority of the population.

i. Labor-Social Relations: As previously said, small-scale industries serve as a training ground for young managers to hone their management skills. This is also true in labor relations; they create opportunities for people to form social bonds.

ii. National Enterprise: Some small-scale businesses make a significant contribution to a country's endeavor to achieve self-sufficiency. Some of the little businesses eventually reach to the top of the economic food chain. This job is extremely important for a country's economic and political stability.

Small-scale businesses play a critical part in the economy by offering products and services that people want, while also attempting to earn a profit by balancing income and costs. As a result, a vibrant, developing economy will emerge, fueled by abundant productive and natural resources as well as educated private-sector executives. More crucially, they should be able to expand in order to meet future demand for goods and services that produce profit for them, which will be reflected in the nation's Gross National Product (GNP) in terms of the entire monetary worth of the country's business operations. Apart from offering job prospects, small businesses provide a simple path to self-employment because one can start a business with as little as \$100,000 (€458.07), if not less. One of the best strategies to conserve our declining foreign exchange profits, which may be invested in profit-generating projects, is to use locally accessible resources. Small-scale company has made a significant contribution to the growth of regional economic activities in the nation of regional groupings. It is common knowledge that a fair size of product created by Nigerian entrepreneurs may be found and sold in certain West African and African countries. As a result, it is considered that if these corporate companies play these duties, they will assist in reducing urban problems and combating racial and sex prejudice in society.

II. Methodology

Survey design was adopted for this study. Data were collected through primary and secondary sources. The questionnaire method was used for easy collection of data for the purpose of this study a descriptive approach is adopted. The population in the study is referred to as the total number of objects that the researcher examines.

This study was carried out in Lagos State of Nigeria, specifically among the registered SME situated at three major clusters in Lagos metropolitan. The 3 different categories are – Consumer technology SMEs at Otigba, Computer village Cluster, Agro-Allied SMEs at Oko-Oba Cluster and Consumer Electronics SME at Alaba International market Cluster. These major clusters in the state have been selected primarily because they have concentration of SME owners and this would assist the researcher in capturing the SMEs.

The questionnaire allocation/distribution to the three (3) identified clusters are as shown below; Oko-Oba Agro-allied SME = 15 out of 20 Identified registered SME owners. Otigba ICT, Computer Village SME Cluster = 46 out of 68 Identified registered SME owners. Alaba international Consumer Electronic SME cluster = 54 out of 75 Identified registered SME owners). Making a TOTAL of 115 questionnaires administered. Data obtained through the questionnaire will be presented and analysed. The simple percentage method was used to analyse the entire variable. Where respondents were presented with multiple choice questions, frequency and percentage were based on counts.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

TABLE.1 Distribution and Collection of Questionnaires.

Options	Oko-Oba Cluster	Otigba Cluster	Alaba Cluster	TOTAL	Percentage (%)
Number Distributed	15	46	54	115	100
Numbers Returned	15	46	53	113	98.26
Numbers Not collected	0	1	1	2	1.74

Source: Field Survey 2020

In table 1 above, 115 copies of questionnaire were distributed, 113 were returned, while just 2 were not returned and were declared invalid for the study. Thus a 98.26% of return was recorded.

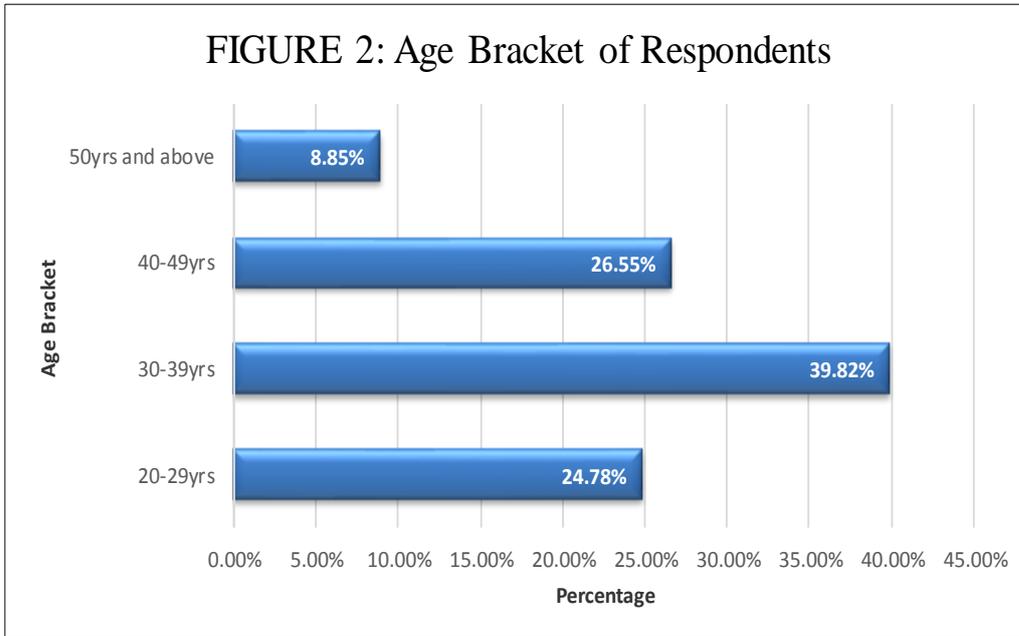
TABLE 2 Personal Information of Respondents n=113

Items	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	109	96.46
	Female	4	3.54
Age	20 – 29 years	28	24.78
	30 – 39 years	45	39.82
	40 – 49 years	30	26.55

50 years and above	10	8.85
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Source: Field Survey 2020.

In Table 2 above, 24.78% of respondents are in the age bracket 20-29 years. 39.82% are age bracket 30-39



years, 26.55% are in the age bracket 40-49 years while 8.85% are 50 years and above. Respondent's gender is largely skewed in favour of male.

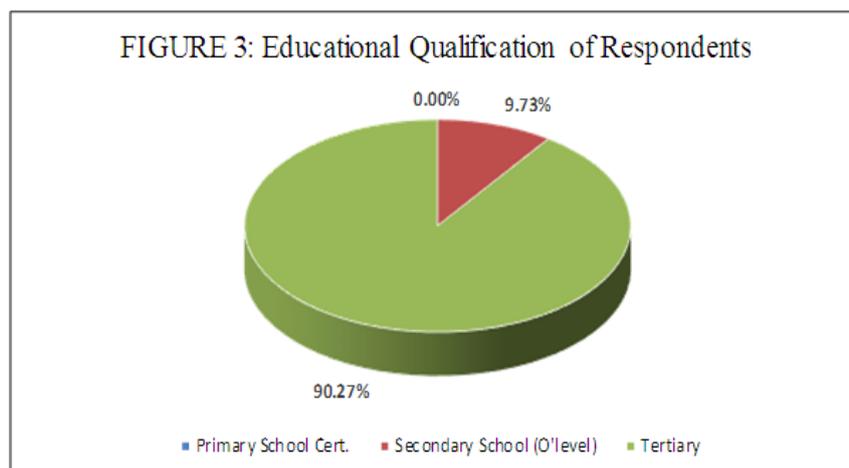
TABLE 3 Educational Background of Respondents. n=113

Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary School	0	0
Secondary (O'level)	11	9.73
Tertiary (OND, HND, BSc, Msc, PhD)	102	90.27

Source: Survey 2020.

Table 3, shows the educational qualification of the respondents. It also shows that no respondent (0%) Stopped at primary school certificate, 9.73% have Secondary School certificate and 90.27% have Tertiary Education.

Figure 3: The respondents' educational background is a clear indicative that respondents have the required education to understand ICT and to use ICT tools.



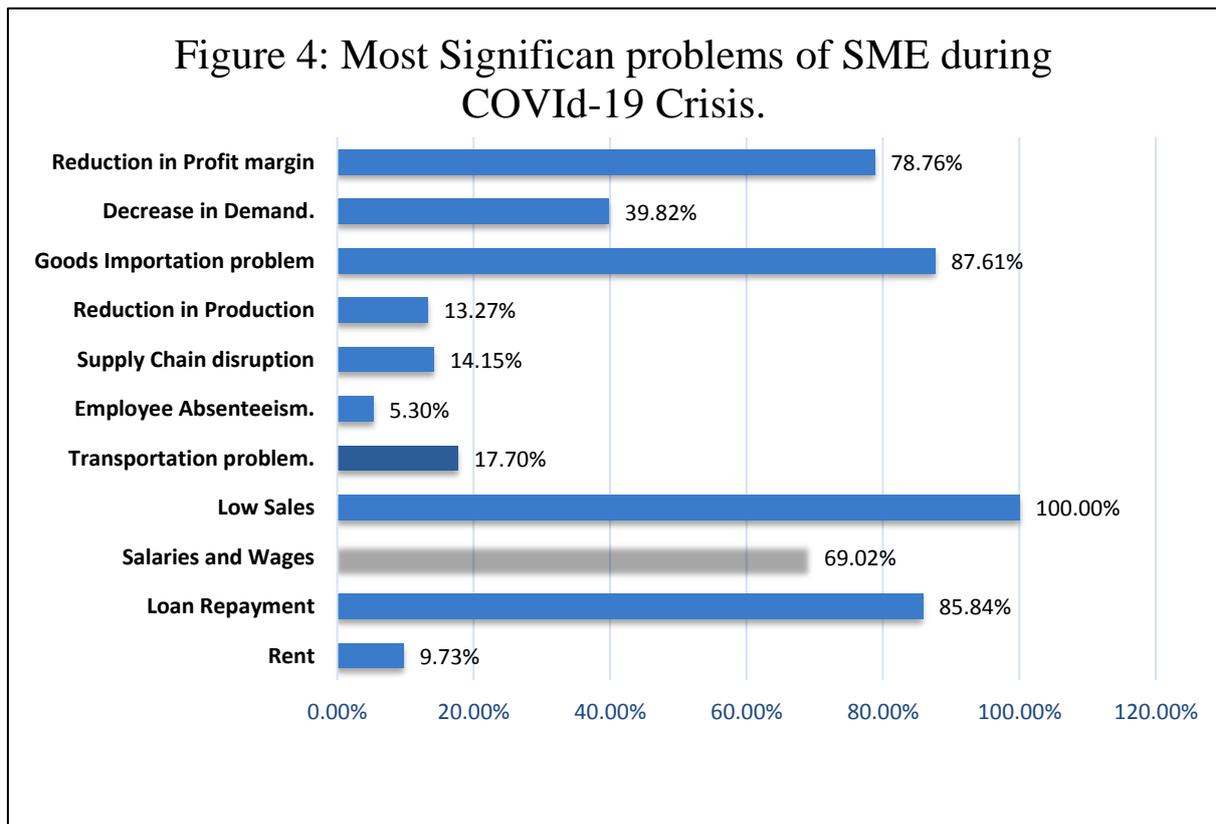
TABEL 4 Most Significant Problems of SMEs during COVID-19 Crisis n=113

Problems	Frequency (Counts)*	Percentage (%)
(1). Rent	11	9.73
(2). Loan Repayment	97	85.84
(3). Salaries and Wages	78	69.02
(4). Low Sales	113	100
(5). Transportation problem.	20	17.7
(6). Employee Absenteeism.	6	5.30
(7). Supply Chain disruption	16	14.15
(8). Reduction in Production	15	13.27
(9). Goods Importation problem	99	87.61
(10). Decrease in Demand.	45	39.82
(11). Reduction in Profit margin	89	78.76

Source: Survey 2020.

* Respondents could select multiple questions; hence frequency and percentage were based on counts (responses).

The respondents were asked to select the areas where they had the most significant problems in table 4 above. Low sales (113) 100% occurred most frequently among the respondents' choice, followed by goods importation problem, which occurred 99 times (87.61%) among the respondents choice. Both Otigba cluster and Alaba international SME cluster deal in products that are completely imported into Nigeria for sale, hence the high frequency of problem of Importation among the respondents. Loan repayment has 97 counts (85.84%), Reduction in Profit has 89 counts (78.76%), Salaries and wages has 78 counts (69.02), Decrease in Demands has 45 counts (39.82%), Supply chain disruption has low count, 16 (14.15%), this is due in part to the proliferation of delivery and Logistic firms who are allowed to operate freely during the COVID-19 crisis, so supply chain did not become a major problem. Reduction in Production has 15 counts (13.27%), followed by Rent and Employee absenteeism with 11 count (9.73%) and 6 counts (5.30%) respectively.



TABEL 5. Types of ICT mostly Tools used by SMEs during the Covid-19 Crisis.

ICT Tools	Frequency*	Percentage (%) *
Internet	113	100
Telephony (Mobile)	113	100
Video Conferencing	23	20.35
Web Portals	32	28.32
Computer	85	75.22
E-Mail	23	20.35
Electronic Payment Device	45	39.82
Radio	15	13.27
Television	4	3.54

Source: Survey 2020.

* Respondents could select multiple questions; hence frequency and percentage were based on counts (responses).

In table 5 above, the respondents were asked to select the type(s) of ICT tools mostly used during the COVID-19 crisis. Internet and Mobile phone (113) 100% occurred among all the respondents' choice. This mean, during the COVID-19 crisis, all the SMEs resulted the use of internet for various online activities to maintain their presence and or sales. This is followed by the use of computer (85)72.22%. Electronic payment device (45) 39.82%. Web Portals (32)28.32%. Video conferencing (23) 20.35%. E-mail (23) 20.35%. Radio (15)13.27% and TV (4)3.54%.

TABLE 6. Transaction/Activities ICTs are used for by SME during COVID-19 n=113

Transaction/Activities	Frequency*	Percentage (%) *
Digital Marketing	5	4.2
Social Media Advertising and Networking	103	91.15
Online Product Sourcing	94	83.19
To keep up with Competitors	89	78.76
Communicate with Customer and Suppliers	98	86.72
To Access Government SME Intervention Fund.	58	51.33
Online Banking	65	57.52
Advertising and Selling on Online Merchants Sites.	108	95.58

Source: Field Survey 2020.

* Respondents could select multiple questions; hence frequency and percentage were based on counts (responses).

The respondents in table 6, were asked to select the activities ICT tools were mostly used for during the COVID-19 era. Advertising and selling on online merchant sites (95.58%), occurred most frequently among the respondents' choice, followed by social media Advertising and marketing (91.15%). Communicate with customers and suppliers (86.72%). Online products sourcing (83.19%). To keep up with competitors (78.76%). Online Banking (57.52%). To access government SME survival fund (51.33%). Digital Marketing (4.2%).

TABLE 7. Role ICT played in the Survival of SME during COVID-19 n= 113

S/N	STATEMENT	SA	A	D	U
1	Use of ICT helped you to survive poor sales during COVID-19 crisis by selling through online merchants.	79%	20%	-	1%
2	Social media Advertising helped the survival of your firm during COVID-19 crisis	90%	10%	-	-
3	The use of the Internet as ICT tool contributed immensely to the survival of your Business during the COVID-19 crisis	89%	9%	-	2%
4	ICT helped you maintain close relationship with customers, which helped patronage during COVID-19 crisis	90%	10%	-	-
5	ICT helped you access government intervention fund for your survival during COVID-19 crisis.	10%	55%	10%	25%

Source: Filed Survey 2020

SA= Strongly Agree. A= Agree. D=Disagree. U=Undecided.

Table 7 above, revealed that almost all the SMEs (99%) agreed that Use of ICT helped to survive poor sale during the COVID-19 by selling through Online Merchant sites. This explains 95% of SME use of internet as activities ICT tools are mostly used for during the Pandemic.

All the SME owners (100%) Agreed that social media advertising helped their firm survival during the COVID-19 pandemic. This agrees with the result of the Activities that SMEs mostly use ICT for, where social media advertising occurred most frequently among respondents' choice, second to Online advertising on merchant site.

98% of respondents agreed that the use of Internet as ICT tool contributed immensely to the survival of your Business during the COVID-19 crisis.

All the respondents (100%), agreed that ICT helped them maintain close relationship with customers, which helped patronage during COVID-19 crisis. However, only 65% agreed that ICT helped them access government intervention fund for your survival during COVID-19 crisis, 10% disagreed and 25% were undecided.

IV. SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

One of the most prominent concerns about the COVID-19 Pandemic is the economic impact. The findings of this study reflect the most serious issues that SMEs faced during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the ICT tools that were most commonly used during that time, the activities or transactions that SMEs used those tools for, and how those tools contributed to the survival of these SMEs during the COVID-19 crisis. The population was split between three market areas in Lagos, which is noted for its high-level business profile.

Low sales as a result of the Pandemic were the most commonly mentioned issue among SMEs, indicating that COVID19 has had a generally negative impact on revenue. Importation of goods was the second most common issue among the SME owners polled. As the pandemic has slowed global trade, SMEs in Nigeria rely heavily on goods importation for customers or inputs, which has resulted in a significant decline in product availability.

Loan repayment, reduction in profits and Salaries/Wages were also significant problems faced by SMEs during the COVID-19 crisis. Loan repayments are usually monthly as such inability to meet monthly revenue target will definitely lead to inability to meet monthly repayment schedule. The outbreak of the Pandemic significantly disrupted sale and goods importation in Nigeria, hence Loan repayment became a major problem for SMEs, since their capital base are usually small or medium.

The survey found that in order for SMEs to survive, they had to accept and/or grow their usage of ICTs, which had become critical tools for their survival. ICT tools such as the internet, mobile phones/tablets, personal computers, and e-payment devices were heavily employed for the following tasks to boost their chances of survival and stay in business while keeping up with competitors:

- To advertise or sell on online merchant sites (such Jumia, Konga, jiji etc in Nigeria), due to cheap advert rate, wider reach and organized logistics system for delivery.
- Advertising, marketing and networking on social medias (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc)
- Communicate with customers and suppliers.

In conclusion, all the SMEs surveyed agreed that ICT played a significant role in their survival during the COVID-19 pandemic up till the time of this survey.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. SMEs and their owners should foster a technology and innovation-friendly culture. SMEs should integrate ICT with their business strategy and look for ways to use it to gain a competitive advantage not just in times of crisis, but throughout their careers.
2. The government should work with internet service providers to provide internet packages and bundles tailored to SMEs. Because the internet was so important to SMEs' survival during the pandemic, internet packages that give them an advantage and are affordable will help them continue to advertise and sell on online platforms, engage in social media marketing and advertising, and engage in other activities that will increase sales volume as a key factor for SME growth and development.
3. Using ICT to access government intervention funds for SMEs was not high on the list of pandemic-related activities. This demonstrates that SMEs are having difficulty accessing the government's small business assistance program. Government web portals should be completely functional and easily accessible to SMEs, and SMEs owners should be effectively informed utilizing multiple methods to contact them.
4. Mobile phones and communication device manufacturers or importers in Nigeria can design phones with software tailored for all SMEs' activities.
5. Using ICT to gain access to government intervention money for SMEs was not among the pandemic-related activities that were prioritized. This shows that SMEs are having trouble using the government's small

business aid program. SME owners should be adequately informed via many ways of contact, and government web portals should be fully functional and easily available to them.

6. A concerted effort should be made to establish ICT training programs at all levels of the educational hierarchy. ICT should also be made compulsory in primary and secondary schools in order to teach more students and boost the number of ICT technical trainees and professionals on the labor market. This would also help because these persons will grow to own SME businesses where their abilities can be utilized.

7. The government can create and maintain policies that encourage these SMEs to use ICT. Such policies may include online registration of SMEs, online filing of tax returns, and internet advertising, among other things. When implemented, this strategy will aid in increasing ICT awareness and usage among SMEs and the country as a whole.

8. Finally, more focus should be placed on encouraging women to participate more actively in SMEs in Nigeria, including the inclusion of ICT and SMEs development in school curricula, and the establishment of more vocational schools in both rural and urban areas of the country.

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