

MARKETING STRATEGIES, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND BUSINESS PERFORMANCE AMONG STUDENT ENTREPRENEURS IN UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS

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Abstract

Student entrepreneurs play a significant role in strengthening the university entrepreneurship ecosystem; however, empirical evidence on the strategies they employ to grow their ventures remains limited. This study investigates the relationship between innovative marketing strategies, student entrepreneurial engagement, and business performance among student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, while examining gender-based differences in marketing adoption. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires from 181 student entrepreneurs while Qualitative insights were obtained through WhatsApp interviews with ten respondents. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis with SPSS (version 30), while qualitative responses were thematically analysed. Results showed that social media promotion ($M = 4.21$), branding ($M = 3.37$), and promotional offers ($M = 3.48$) were the most frequently adopted innovative marketing strategies, reflecting students' reliance on low-cost digital marketing tools. Gender differences were also observed: female entrepreneurs prioritised social media, packaging, and relational marketing, whereas male entrepreneurs focused on analytical and problem-solving approaches. The study concludes that innovative marketing and active entrepreneurial engagement are critical for student business success. It recommends that universities strengthen digital marketing education, experiential entrepreneurship programmes, and gender-responsive training to enhance the performance and sustainability of student-led enterprises.

Keywords:

business performance, engagement, gender differences, innovative marketing strategies, student entrepreneurship

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Introduction

Student entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical avenue for youth empowerment, particularly in Nigeria, where higher education institutions, like the University of Lagos, serve as a breeding ground for budding entrepreneurs. With youth unemployment at a significant high, entrepreneurship provides a means to not only contribute to the economy but also to develop essential life skills. Despite the growing trend of student-led businesses, there is limited research focused on how specific marketing strategies influence the engagement and performance of student entrepreneurs within Nigerian universities, especially the University of Lagos. Existing studies have predominantly examined entrepreneurship education, innovation, and broader entrepreneurial trends, but the relationship between marketing strategy adoption and the resulting business outcomes for students remains underexplored.

Marketing strategies, particularly digital marketing, are crucial for the growth of student-run businesses. However, the full potential of these strategies is often underutilized due to challenges such as limited resources, lack of expertise, and time constraints. The rise of digital platforms has made it easier for businesses to reach broader audiences, but many student entrepreneurs fail to adopt these tools effectively. Joseph (2016) notes that marketing strategies, including promotions and direct distribution channels, significantly influence business performance, suggesting that effective marketing could bridge the performance gap for student entrepreneurs. Yet, studies specifically examining the role of digital marketing within the context of student-led enterprises are scarce, particularly in Nigerian universities.

Moreover, student entrepreneurial engagement has been shown to mediate the relationship between marketing strategies and business performance. The role of engagement is vital in understanding how entrepreneurs navigate their academic commitments alongside their entrepreneurial ventures, and how marketing strategies can be optimised to enhance this balance. Additionally, gender dynamics in the adoption of marketing strategies and their subsequent business success have not been sufficiently studied.

Recent findings have pointed out the growing importance of digital marketing for business growth. However, the adoption and effectiveness of these strategies among student entrepreneurs, particularly when viewed through a gendered lens, is still an emerging area that lacks substantial empirical data. Ekpe et al. (2016) also underscores the influence of factors such as price, advertising, and motivation on the purchase behaviours of young entrepreneurs, which could be analogous to student-led businesses. This study aims to examine the marketing strategies currently adopted by student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos, assess their effectiveness, and explore the role of student engagement in business performance.

Statement of the problem

Student entrepreneurship is becoming an increasingly significant trend in higher education institutions, as students seek innovative ways to support their education and gain practical business experience. Despite growing student participation in entrepreneurial ventures, many

of these businesses struggle to achieve long-term sustainability and success, both during their time on campus and after graduation. Effective marketing is critical for business growth, as it directly influences a company's ability to reach and retain customers, build brand awareness, and ultimately generate sales. However, due to the unique demographic of the student population, which often serves as the primary market for student-led enterprises, traditional marketing strategies may not effectively engage student customers. Many student entrepreneurs also face difficulties balancing academic responsibilities with business management, (Aladejebi & Amao-Taiwo, 2023) limiting their time and energy to develop and execute effective marketing strategies tailored to their specific target market. Additionally, financial constraints exacerbate the problem, as students often lack the capital needed to invest in comprehensive marketing campaigns, particularly those that leverage digital technologies. However, understanding how student entrepreneurs utilise the existing digital infrastructure and the challenges they face in fully leveraging these tools is critical for designing effective support systems tailored to their needs. This study aims to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence that advances understanding of the dynamics linking marketing strategies, student engagement, and business performance among student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos. This research will inform university policy, helping institutions develop and implement support mechanisms tailored to the unique needs of student entrepreneurs, particularly in marketing (Aladejebi & Amao-Taiwo, 2023).

Research Questions

1. What innovative marketing strategies do student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos adopt to enhance their business performance?
2. How does student entrepreneurial engagement impact the performance of student-led businesses at the University of Lagos?
3. What are the gender-based differences in the marketing strategies employed by male and female student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos?

Literature Review

Innovative Marketing Strategies of Student Entrepreneurs

Innovative marketing strategies are increasingly central to the success of student entrepreneurs, especially in environments characterised by limited resources and intense competition. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour provides a useful framework for understanding how external factors—such as access to capital, time constraints, and entrepreneurial skills, shape marketing decisions and outcomes. Student entrepreneurs, who must balance academic demands with business ventures, face unique challenges in executing marketing strategies that can drive business growth (Aladejebi & Amao-Taiwo, 2023). These constraints align with Shirokova et al. (2016), who argue that entrepreneurial success is contingent not only on motivation but also on the availability of institutional and social resources that can support innovation. Similarly, Petrylaite (2018) examined marketing practices among student entrepreneurial teams within higher education settings and found that network-based marketing and context-driven innovation were vital to building brand credibility.

Alhassan and Nwankwo (2021) also averred that while students are often motivated by financial independence, their capacity to design and implement effective marketing strategies is constrained by inadequate expertise and funding. To address these gaps, Sriram et al. (2020); and Alhassan and Nwankwo (2021) recommend embedding entrepreneurship more deeply within university curricula and providing structured marketing training to enhance students' practical capabilities.

While marketing strategies have been widely examined in the SME context, limited attention has been given to how student entrepreneurs develop and apply innovative approaches suited to their unique circumstances. Zaki et al. (2025) identified key innovative marketing practices, including product innovation, customer-centric approaches, and informal market observation, as critical for business survival. Their findings demonstrate that student entrepreneurs increasingly rely on digital marketing tools and social media engagement to attract customers and maintain visibility in competitive markets.

Ameh Abu Amodu and Ama Aka (2017) also found that networking ability substantially affects entrepreneurial innovativeness and marketing performance in Nigerian universities, reinforcing the view that social networks serve as both a marketing and resource-acquisition mechanism. Integrating these findings, Mojekeh et al. (2018) argue that entrepreneurial marketing, which merges innovation, resource leveraging, and customer intensity, offers a flexible framework for students to operate effectively in constrained environments. Similarly, Ogunode et al. (2020) and Karanja (2021) underscores that digital marketing can significantly enhance visibility, customer acquisition, and growth for entrepreneurs in Africa. However, Ajibola et al. (2022) and Oladipo (2020) highlight persistent barriers to digital adoption, such as low digital literacy and insufficient institutional support, which hinder student entrepreneurs from maximising these tools.

Student Engagement and Business Performance

Student engagement has emerged as a critical determinant of entrepreneurial success and business performance among university students. Research by Amao-Taiwo and Ekpe-Iko (2021) emphasises that student engagement in entrepreneurship education significantly enhances entrepreneurial skill development and practical business competence. Similarly, Lahikainen and Peltonen (2021) argue that universities that empower students to contribute meaningfully to entrepreneurship-related decision-making foster deeper engagement and higher entrepreneurial outcomes. However, much of the existing literature on student engagement remains conceptual, with limited empirical examination of how different forms of engagement translate to measurable business performance.

Recent empirical studies have begun to unpack the relationship between engagement and entrepreneurial outcomes. Masri et al. (2021), showed that engagement in entrepreneurship learning, particularly through collaboration with academic staff and peers, strongly predicts entrepreneurial intention and subsequent business activity. Similarly, Koe (2023) observed that emotional engagement, defined as students' passion, persistence, and self-efficacy during

entrepreneurship courses, had the most decisive influence on entrepreneurial intention, while skill-based engagement was less impactful. These findings align with Sansone et al. (2024) who found that digital skills and technological engagement significantly predict both entrepreneurial engagement and student entrepreneurship. From an African perspective, Osakede, Lawanson, and Sobowale (2017) found that entrepreneurial engagement among Nigerian university students does not negatively affect academic performance but varies significantly by gender and background. Mele et al. (2024) however demonstrated that university business incubators enhance student engagement by providing mentorship, networking, and experiential learning opportunities that improve entrepreneurial performance.

Gender-Based Differences in Marketing Strategies

Studies consistently show that male and female student entrepreneurs adopt different marketing strategies, often reflecting their distinct risk attitudes, access to resources, and socialisation patterns. Šlogar et al. (2021) found statistically significant gender differences in entrepreneurial competencies among undergraduate students in business and digital marketing, with female students showing higher creativity and communication competence, while male students reported stronger strategic and risk-taking orientations. Also, Rotnitsky et al. (2023) found that female students usually outperform their male counterparts on collaborative and creative marketing tasks, yet exhibit lower entrepreneurial self-efficacy. This factor constrains their confidence in executing innovative marketing campaigns. These findings echo earlier work by Das and Jaiswal (2018), who reported that female students in entrepreneurship programmes demonstrated stronger “grasping ability” in marketing and communication but tended to underestimate their entrepreneurial competence.

Empirical evidence by Zakaria et al. (2025) shows that male students reported higher perceived behavioural control under the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) framework, thereby suggesting that men are more confident in executing marketing-related entrepreneurial intentions. However, female entrepreneurs often leverage relationship-oriented, socially driven marketing, utilising social media engagement and storytelling to compensate for resource and confidence gaps, a pattern corroborated by Mansour (2019) in her study of Sudanese university students.

In the digital age, gender also shapes how student entrepreneurs engage with online marketing platforms. Bhardwaj and Neihssial (2023) found that male student entrepreneurs are more likely to experiment with paid advertising tools such as Google Ads, while female students prefer organic marketing channels like Instagram and word of mouth, which align with their collaborative and community-driven tendencies. Ha and Koo (2024) emphasise that marketing competencies act as a mediating bridge between entrepreneurial intention and venture performance, and that female students tend to excel in understanding customer needs but underperform in strategic commercialisation.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersectionalities among marketing strategies, student entrepreneurial engagement, and business performance. The descriptive survey design served as the quantitative component, enabling the collection of standardised data through a structured questionnaire administered to student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos. At the same time, the qualitative component allowed deeper exploration of personal experiences and contextual factors influencing marketing practices.

The population comprised all registered student entrepreneurs operating small-scale businesses within the University of Lagos, representing both undergraduate and postgraduate students across faculties. Based on the data found on the University website at the time of this research, a total of 329 student entrepreneurs formed the accessible population. Using Taro Yamane's (1967) sample size determination formula with a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 181 respondents was obtained. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select student entrepreneurs actively engaged in business activities. Data were collected using the Marketing Strategies, Student Entrepreneurial Engagement, and Business Performance Questionnaire (MSSEBPQ). To complement the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted via WhatsApp with 10 student entrepreneurs. This virtual interview method was chosen for convenience, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness. Reliability and validity were ensured through a pilot test conducted with 30 student entrepreneurs from Lagos State University, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.78, confirming internal consistency. Expert review by entrepreneurship and psychometric scholars further established content and face validity. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 25, with descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, and standard deviation) summarising and presenting responses with infographs. Qualitative interview data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and contextual explanations that supported the quantitative results. While the study provides valuable insights, it acknowledges limitations, including reliance on self-reported data and focus on a single institution. Future research should expand to multiple universities.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Data of Participants

Bio-data	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	80	44.2
Female	101	55.8
Total	181	100.0
Age Distribution of Respondents		
16-20 years	19	10.6
21-25years	46	25.6
26-30 years	75	41.7
30 years above	41	22.6

Total	181	100
Business Sector		
Education	26	14.3
Technology	17	9.1
Health and wellness	19	1.0
E-Commerce Store	10	5.1
Food and Beverage	36	19.9
Service Based	26	14.4
Sustainability	23	12.7
Others	24	13.3
Total	181	100.0
Business Environment		
On campus	61	33.7
Off campus	70	39.2
Both	50	27.6
	181	100m

Table 1 shows that female respondents (55.8%, $n = 101$) slightly outnumbered male respondents (44.2%, $n = 80$), indicating a growing participation of female students in entrepreneurial activities within the University of Lagos. Regarding age distribution, most respondents were between 26–30 years (41.7%, $n = 75$), followed by those aged 21–25 years (25.6%, $n = 46$), 30 years and above (22.6%, $n = 41$), and 16–20 years (10.6%, $n = 19$). Analysis of the business sectors shows that student ventures span diverse industries, with the largest proportion operating in food and beverage (19.9%, $n = 36$), followed by service-based enterprises (14.4%, $n = 26$), education-related businesses (14.3%, $n = 26$), and sustainability ventures (12.7%, $n = 23$). Smaller proportions were involved in health and wellness (10%, $n = 19$), technology (9.1%, $n = 17$), other sectors (13.3%, $n = 24$), and e-commerce (5.1%, $n = 10$). The business environment data show that a considerable proportion of respondents operated their ventures off campus (39.2%, $n = 70$), followed by on campus (33.7%, $n = 61$), and both on and off campus (27.6%, $n = 50$).

Research Question 1: What innovative marketing strategies do student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos adopt to enhance their business performance?

Table 2: Adoption of Innovative Marketing Strategies among Student Entrepreneurs (N = 181)

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	U (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	Rank
I actively use social media platforms to promote my business.	21.0	43.6	17.1	11.6	6.6	4.21	1
I adopt promotional offers to attract customers.	16.0	29.8	18.2	23.8	9.4	3.48	2
I use branding materials such as logos and slogans.	14.9	29.8	19.9	23.2	12.2	3.37	3
I use customer loyalty programmes to retain clients.	13.3	25.4	22.1	22.7	16.6	3.16	4
I carry out market research before launching new products or services.	13.8	26.0	21.0	22.1	17.1	3.14	5

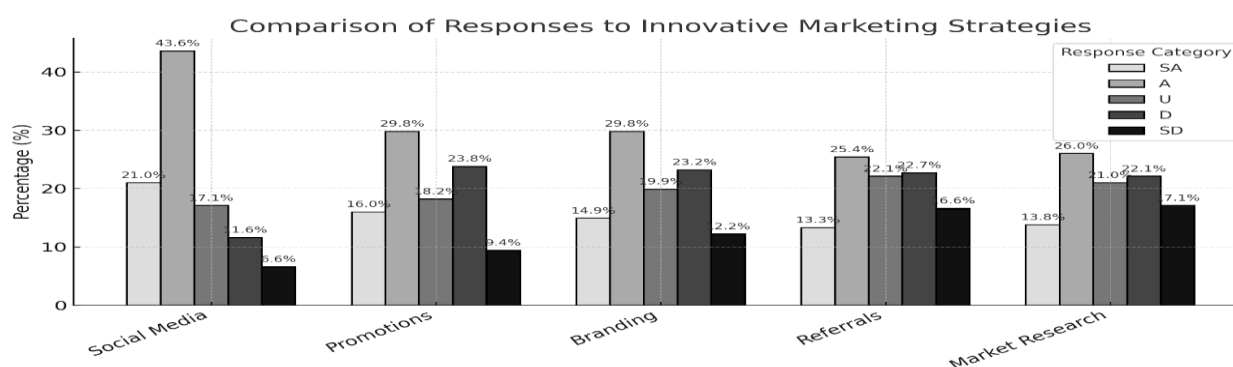


Figure 2: Side-by-side comparison of student entrepreneurs' responses to five innovative marketing strategies at the University of Lagos (N = 181).

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 2, the most widely adopted innovative marketing strategy among student entrepreneurs is the use of social media platforms for business promotion ($M = 4.21$), with a combined 64.6% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. Promotional offers ($M = 3.48$) and branding activities ($M = 3.37$) followed, indicating moderate adoption. Strategies such as referrals and customer loyalty programmes ($M = 3.16$) and market research ($M = 3.14$) were least adopted, reflecting limited exposure to more structured marketing techniques and possibly low awareness of their long-term business benefits.

These findings align with previous studies noting that digital marketing as a dominant strategy among young entrepreneurs in resource-constrained environments (Koe et al., 2021) and confirm that accessibility and peer visibility drive the adoption of social media-based innovation (Adebayo, 2020).

Innovative Marketing Strategies Adopted by Student Entrepreneurs

1. Digital and Social Media Marketing
 - └ WhatsApp for brand promotion
 - "WhatsApp status – most students are connected and view each other's statuses."
 - └ Instagram & follower-based credibility
 - "People ask for your handle. If they see 10k followers, they believe your product is good."
 - └ Multi-platform posting
 - "Posting about my brand across student platforms. Even when I think no one sees it, sales come."
 - └ Digital self-branding
 - "Add brand name to my name on social media – creatively brand myself on WhatsApp & Instagram."
2. Aesthetic and Packaging Innovation
 - └ Product presentation
 - "Packaging is the marketing trick that works best."
 - └ Emotional customer experience
 - "She was wowed when she opened it and became a repeat buyer."
 - └ Branding consistency
 - "I packaged it nicely... now she recommends me to others."
3. Relationship and Network Marketing
 - └ Word-of-mouth & referrals
 - "A friend says 'Check out Firr Hijabs.' That counts too."
 - └ Building trust & rapport
 - "I used the welcoming moment to become friendly – they later vouched for me."
 - └ Events & student ambassadors
 - "Attended school events; made use of student ambassadors in Unilag and Medilag."
 - └ Peer-to-peer influence
 - "My classmates repost my products – it's the best form of marketing."
4. Value-Based and Psychological Marketing
 - └ Solving customer problems
 - "Help them solve related problems, and the product becomes part of the solution."
 - └ Outcome-focused sales
 - "Get this book and have an A – that works because of trust."
 - └ Freebies and psychological levers
 - "Giving out freebies and discounts using strategic psychological levers."
 - └ Appearance and presentation
 - "Looking good helped me gain respect and interest before presenting my proposal."
5. Experiential and Personality-Driven Marketing
 - └ Personality infusion
 - "I integrated my personality into my business – warm, calm, welcoming, professional."
 - └ Storytelling & personal branding
 - "Build relationships and pitch myself to people – remind them of their birthdays."
 - └ Volunteering & visibility
 - "Volunteer, attend events, pitch myself to friends."

Figure 3. *Visual hierarchy of innovative marketing strategies adopted by student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos.* Data source: Field Survey, 2025.

Figure 3 shows the hierarchical visualisation of marketing strategies adopted by student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos through five overarching domains: digital and social media marketing, aesthetic innovation, relationship-driven approaches, value-based engagement, and personality-led branding. Each domain integrates actionable tactics and lived experiences as expressed by participants. For instance, digital strategies leverage WhatsApp status and Instagram credibility to establish visibility within close-knit peer networks. One participant emphasised, "WhatsApp status — most students are connected and view each other's statuses," while another affirmed the influence of perceived popularity: "If they see 10K followers, they believe your product is good." This confirms research suggesting that digital micro-influencing is particularly potent in youth-driven markets (Ahmad & Karim, 2026.).

Beyond digital tactics, the tree illustrates that marketing for these students is inherently emotional, social, and experiential. Strategies like "packaging is the marketing trick that works best" and "I integrated my personality into my business — warm, calm, welcoming" reflect a strong infusion of personal values and sensory experiences into branding. Peer-based referrals and ambassador programmes further anchor student businesses within relational trust networks. Moreover, value-driven messaging such as "Help them solve related problems, and

the product becomes part of the solution” demonstrates not just entrepreneurial acumen, but a deeper awareness of community needs.

Research Question 2: How does student entrepreneurial engagement impact the performance of student-led businesses at the University of Lagos?

Table 3: Student Entrepreneurial Engagement & Business Performance

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	U (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	Rank
Participation in university-organised entrepreneurship events enhanced my business performance.	12.7	26.5	22.1	22.1	15.5	3.01	1
Applying academic knowledge from entrepreneurship courses contributed to my business growth.	9.9	22.1	16.0	30.4	21.5	2.68	2
Involvement with the university’s entrepreneurship incubation centers supported my business growth.	11.0	21.0	16.0	28.2	23.8	2.58	3
Entrepreneurship education has improved customer patronage for my business.	9.9	22.1	16.0	27.6	24.3	2.52	4
Interactions with entrepreneurship lecturers have helped increase my business revenue.	9.9	22.1	16.0	29.3	22.7	2.49	5

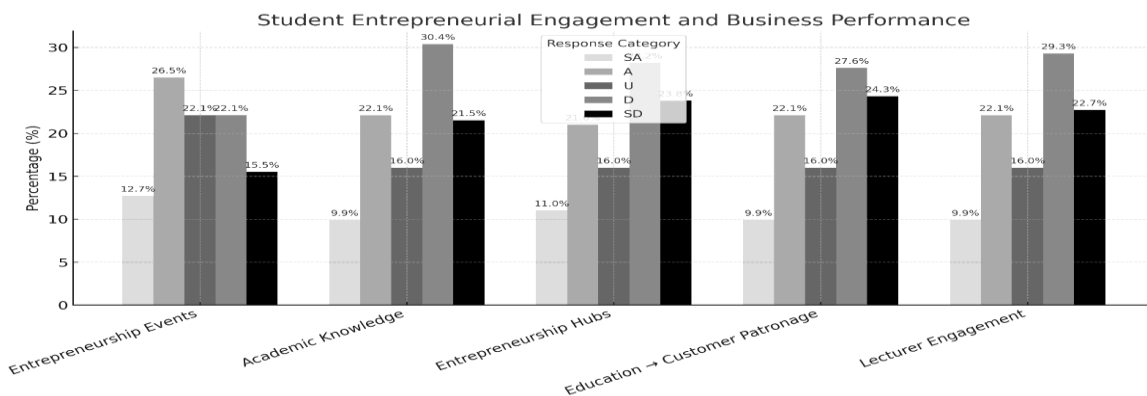


Figure 4. Perceived impact of student entrepreneurial engagement strategies on business performance. Data source: Field Survey, 2025.

As shown in Table 3 and Figure 4, the highest-rated engagement factor influencing business performance was participation in university-organised entrepreneurship events ($M = 3.01$), with a combined 39.2% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. This supports findings by Nabi et al. (2017) and Walter and Block (2016), who note that active participation in experiential entrepreneurship programmes enhances entrepreneurial competencies and business growth among university students. Applying academic knowledge from entrepreneurship courses ($M = 2.68$) and involvement with university entrepreneurship

incubation centres ($M = 2.58$) followed closely, showing moderate influence on business growth. The finding aligns with Fayolle and Liñán (2014), who observed that entrepreneurship education often fosters entrepreneurial intention.

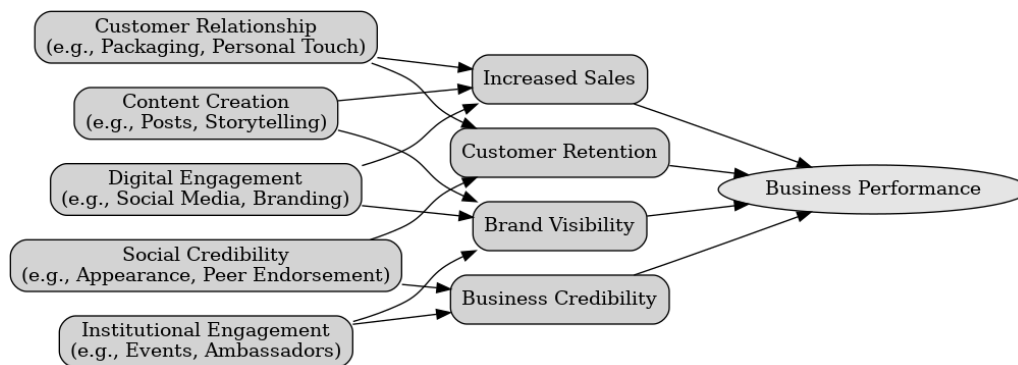


Figure 5: Thematic Map Linking Student Entrepreneurial Engagement to Business Performance. source: Field Survey, 2025.

As illustrated in Figure 5, student entrepreneurial engagement encompasses a variety of behaviors that collectively enhance business performance. **Institutional engagement**, such as participation in campus events and leveraging student ambassador networks, contributes to improved visibility and credibility: “Attended school events... used student ambassadors in Unilag and Medilag” (P1). **Digital engagement**, including consistent social media branding and platform use, is closely tied to increased sales: “Posting across student platforms... funny how sales still come in” (P3), and “People ask for your handle. If they see 10k followers, they believe your product is good” (P2).

Customer-centred strategies also play a pivotal role. One participant highlighted the emotional power of packaging in customer retention: “She was wowed when she opened it... she has bought like five times since” (P3). Similarly, **peer trust and personal presentation** supported business credibility: “Looking good helped me gain respect and interest before presenting my proposal” (P1). These relational and perceptual tactics build sustained loyalty, reinforcing earlier findings that holistic, socially embedded engagement improves entrepreneurial performance (Ahmad & Karim, 2026). Collectively, these themes demonstrate how both formal support systems and informal relationship-building significantly contribute to measurable business outcomes among student entrepreneurs.

Research Question 3: What is the gender-based differences in the marketing strategies employed by male and female student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos?

Table 4: Gender-based differences in the marketing strategies employed student entrepreneurs

Marketing strategy dimension	Male (M)	Female (M)	Difference	Interpretation
Use of social media for promotion	4.12	4.31	+0.19	Female entrepreneurs show slightly higher reliance on social media for visibility and networking.
Use of promotional offers (discounts, bonuses)	3.41	3.55	+0.14	Women more often use incentive-based and relationship-driven tactics.
Branding (logos, packaging, aesthetics)	3.22	3.58	+0.36	Strong gender gap; women emphasise presentation, packaging, and aesthetics as competitive tools.
Customer referrals and word-of-mouth	3.28	3.19	-0.09	Men rely slightly more on direct referrals, often peer-to-peer or performance-driven.
Market research before launching new products	3.32	3.01	-0.31	Male entrepreneurs exhibit more analytical and planning-oriented approaches.

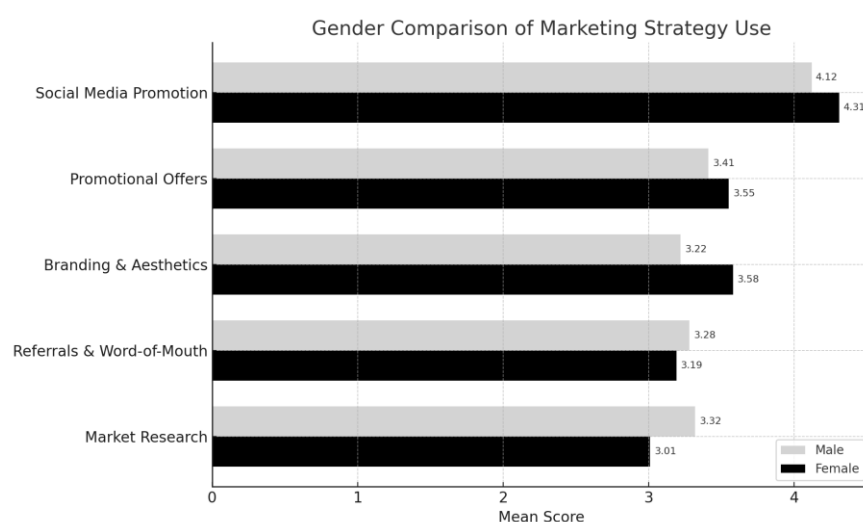


Figure 6: Gender Differences in the Use of Marketing Strategies

Table 4 and Figure 6 present a comparative analysis of the marketing strategies adopted by male and female student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos. The data shows that female entrepreneurs consistently report higher usage of strategies related to digital engagement and aesthetic branding, including social media promotion ($M = 4.31$ vs. 4.12), promotional offers ($M = 3.55$ vs. 3.41), and branding and aesthetics ($M = 3.58$ vs. 3.22). These findings suggest that women tend to favour visibility-oriented and relationship-driven approaches, aligning with research that highlights gendered preferences in marketing behaviour (Liu & Suh, 2022).

Conversely, male entrepreneurs showed slightly greater reliance on market research ($M = 3.32$ vs. 3.01) and peer referrals ($M = 3.28$ vs. 3.19), indicating a more analytical, performance-based orientation. The marked difference in branding strategy use ($+0.36$ in favour of females) particularly underscores how presentation and aesthetics function as competitive tools within female-led ventures.

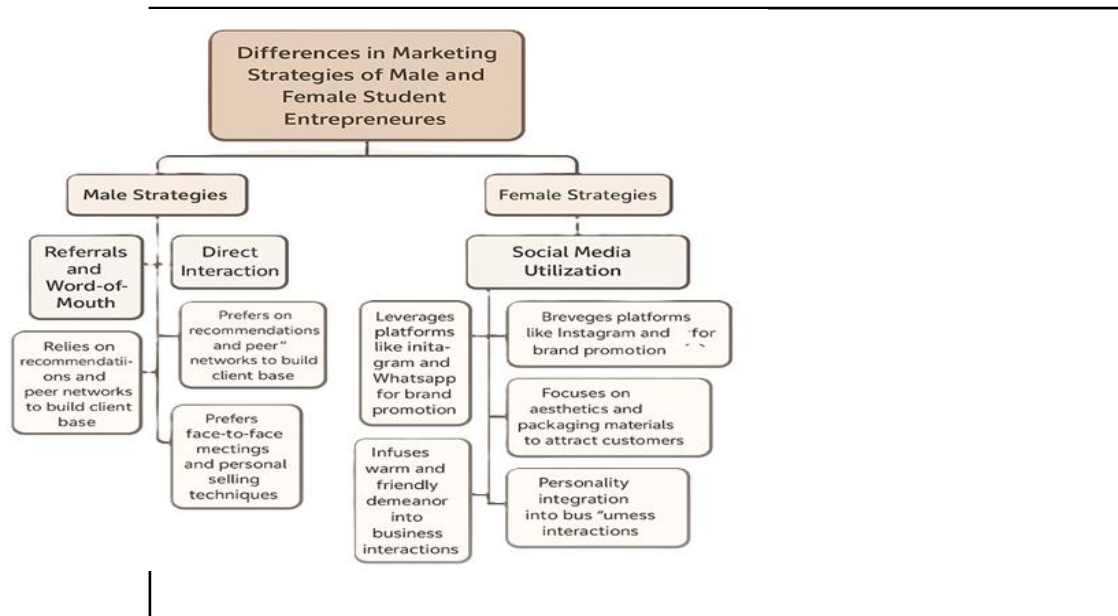


Figure 6: Coding Tree of Gender-Based Marketing Strategies among Student Entrepreneurs. Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2025. Note. The figure shows hierarchical coding relationships derived from inductive thematic analysis of interview data ($N = 10$).

Figure 6 presents the coding tree illustrating the hierarchical relationship between initial codes, subthemes, and overarching themes derived from the qualitative data. The coding process began with open coding of participants' interview responses, followed by axial coding to identify patterns related to gendered marketing behaviors. Two major categories emerged: *Female Entrepreneurial Strategies* and *Male Entrepreneurial Strategies*. Under *Female Entrepreneurial Strategies*, three dominant subthemes were identified: (a) *Social Media Visibility*, (b) *Packaging and Aesthetic Branding*, and (c) *Relational and Emotional Marketing*. These subthemes reflect how female student entrepreneurs emphasised visual appeal, online presence, and interpersonal connection as mechanisms for customer attraction and retention. In contrast, *Male Entrepreneurial Strategies* encompassed three subthemes: (a) *Problem-Solving Orientation*, (b) *Analytical and Value-Based Marketing*, and (c) *Trust-Building through Demonstrated Competence*. Male respondents often framed marketing as an extension of technical credibility and performance assurance, using logical appeals and peer-based trust to drive sales. The coding tree thus highlights clear gendered distinctions in marketing logic: female entrepreneurs rely on relational and aesthetic innovation, while male entrepreneurs adopt rational, performance-driven strategies. This structure aligns with the quantitative findings (see Table 4), reinforcing the conclusion that gender shapes both the *approach* and *execution* of marketing strategies among student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study shows that innovative marketing strategies particularly social media promotion, promotional offers, and branding are the most widely adopted tools among student entrepreneurs at the University of Lagos. This aligns with earlier research by Karanja (2021) and Ogunode et al. (2020), who found that digital marketing drives market expansion and customer acquisition for small businesses in Africa. The preference for low-cost, high-impact channels like Instagram and WhatsApp mirrors findings by Ajibola and Oladipo (2022), who argued that affordability and accessibility motivate digital adoption among Nigerian student entrepreneurs. However, the low engagement with structured marketing practices such as customer loyalty programmes and market research suggests a skill gap in strategic marketing planning.

Student entrepreneurial engagement emerged as a critical mediator between marketing strategies and business performance. This supports Nabi et al. (2017) and Walter and Block (2016), who demonstrated that experiential entrepreneurship education significantly improves entrepreneurial competence and venture performance. However, the limited influence of entrepreneurship courses and incubation hubs ($M = 2.68$ and 2.58 , respectively) highlights a disconnect between theoretical instruction and practical business application. Similar gaps have been reported in African contexts, such as by Akor and Udoh (2022) and Mele et al. (2024), emphasising that university-based entrepreneurship programmes in Nigeria often lack the applied orientation needed to translate learning into business success. Internationally, Koe (2023) and Sansone et al. (2024) found that digital and emotional engagement are increasingly vital forms of entrepreneurial capital, suggesting that universities must reframe engagement not merely as participation but as digital empowerment and sustained experiential learning. Finally, gender-based differences were evident in marketing strategy adoption, with female student entrepreneurs reporting higher engagement in digital promotion, branding, and customer relationship management, while males leaned toward market research and direct referrals. This reflects a gendered divergence in entrepreneurial orientation, female entrepreneurs favoring aesthetic, relational, and trust-based strategies, and male entrepreneurs adopting analytical and performance-driven approaches. These findings are consistent with Šlogar et al. (2021) and Mansour (2019), who observed that female entrepreneurs often compensate for resource constraints with relational capital and creative branding. In Nigeria, Ojong (2021) similarly found that women's entrepreneurship is driven more by emotional intelligence and social connection than by formal strategic planning. Globally, Ha and Koo (2024) noted that marketing competencies mediate gender disparities in entrepreneurial outcomes, with women excelling in customer engagement but underperforming in commercialisation strategies.

Recommendation

1. Universities should embed digital and innovative marketing training into entrepreneurship programmes through workshops and hands-on modules. Entrepreneurship centers should partner with industry experts to mentor students on cost-effective branding, social media promotion, and customer engagement techniques.

2. Institutions should promote active entrepreneurial participation by linking classroom instruction with real-world business incubation and mentorship. Entrepreneurship hubs should create peer networks and competitions that encourage students to apply marketing strategies within practical projects, strengthening business outcomes.
3. University and policy stakeholders should implement gender-responsive entrepreneurship support. Female entrepreneurs should receive targeted training in digital visibility and branding, while male entrepreneurs should be guided toward data-driven marketing and analytical strategy development.

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