



MODERATING ROLE OF COMPETITIVE INTENSITY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFFILIATE MARKETING AND SALES GROWTH OF SMALL AND MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES IN KADUNA STATE

By

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of affiliate marketing and competitive intensity on the sales growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Kaduna State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the direct effects of affiliate marketing and competitive intensity on sales growth and further explored the indirect effect of competitive intensity on sales growth through affiliate marketing. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected from SME managers and owners using structured questionnaires. The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the SmartPLS software. The results revealed that affiliate marketing significantly have effects on sales growth, indicating that SMEs that adopt affiliate marketing are more likely to experience improved sales growth. Similarly, competitive intensity was found to have a strong and significant positive effect on sales growth. However, the study also established a negative and significant indirect effect of competitive intensity on sales growth through affiliate marketing, indicating that although competition stimulates sales directly, it reduces the effectiveness of affiliate marketing in driving growth. The study concludes that both affiliate marketing and competitive intensity are critical drivers of SME growth. It recommends that SMEs strengthen their affiliate marketing by integrating them with other digital strategies, pursue differentiation in competitive markets, and leverage innovation to sustain growth. Marketers are also encouraged to provide supportive frameworks and training to enhance SMEs' digital marketing capabilities.

Key words: *Affiliate Marketing, Sales Growth and Competitive intensity*

Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a significant role in Nigeria's economic development through employment generation, income creation, and poverty reduction. Despite their importance, many SMEs face persistent challenges that hinder their sales growth. These challenges include intense market competition, infrastructural deficiencies, economic instability, and limited digital presence, all of which negatively affect business performance and long-term sustainability.

Given these constraints, sales growth has become a critical indicator of firm performance and survival. It reflects a firm's ability to implement effective marketing strategies, attract and retain customers, and efficiently manage its sales operations (Digdowiseiso & Prameswari, 2021; Maulana et al., 2023). As the primary source of revenue generation, sustained growth in sales turnover enhances profitability and strengthens competitive advantage (Tarmidi, Sari, & Sormin, 2020; Warsame, 2023). Therefore, identifying strategic mechanisms capable of stimulating sales growth remains a central concern for SMEs seeking long-term sustainability.

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In response to this need, one emerging strategy that has attracted considerable attention is affiliate marketing. Affiliate marketing is a performance-based marketing strategy in which publishers or independent sales agents are rewarded through commissions based on actual sales generated (Govoni, 2012). Through this approach, firms collaborate with affiliates who promote their products or services to broader audiences, thereby expanding market reach and increasing potential sales. With rising internet penetration and the rapid growth of digital commerce in Nigeria, affiliate marketing has become increasingly relevant for SMEs seeking cost-effective marketing alternatives.

Furthermore, affiliate marketing is widely regarded as an efficient and budget-friendly advertising method because firms incur marketing expenses only when desired outcomes such as completed sales, are achieved (Brad Smith, 2020). It is often integrated with other digital marketing strategies such as email marketing, search engine marketing, social media marketing, search engine optimization, and retargeting (Capano et al., 2016; Schwarz, 2011). Beyond minimizing marketing waste, affiliate marketing enables firms to expand their customer base with minimal resource commitment (Liu, 2020). Consequently, it has evolved into a mainstream strategy within the e-commerce environment, creating mutual benefits for both firms and affiliates (Suresh & Priya, 2018).

However, while affiliate marketing presents substantial opportunities, firms operate within dynamic and highly competitive environments that may influence its effectiveness. Competitive intensity refers to the degree of rivalry among firms within an industry, typically manifested through aggressive pricing, promotional battles, product innovation, and strategic market positioning (Cao, Xu, & Liu, 2018). The rapid advancement of technology and increased globalization in the 21st century have further intensified competitive pressures across industries. For SMEs in Kaduna State, such heightened competitive intensity may significantly shape not only overall sales performance but also the outcomes of marketing strategies such as affiliate marketing.

Importantly, prior empirical studies examining the relationship between affiliate marketing and sales growth have produced inconsistent findings (Abbas, Hasanuddin, & Umar, 2023; Nengah & Kertiriasih, n.d.). While some studies report a positive and significant relationship, others find weak or statistically insignificant effects. These inconsistencies suggest that contextual factors may condition the effectiveness of affiliate marketing in driving sales growth. Among such factors, competitive intensity appears particularly relevant.

Accordingly, competitive intensity may function not only as a direct determinant of sales growth but also as a moderating variable that influences the strength and direction of the relationship between affiliate marketing and sales growth. In view of this theoretical and empirical gap, the present study examines the effect of affiliate marketing on sales growth, the impact of competitive intensity on SMEs' sales growth, and the moderating role of competitive intensity in the relationship between affiliate marketing and sales growth among SMEs in Kaduna State.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Affiliate Marketing and Sales Growth

Affiliate marketing plays a significant role in enhancing business performance, particularly sales growth. Prior studies have shown that affiliate marketing contributes to increased customer acquisition, improved purchase intentions, stronger consumer trust, and expanded market reach (Duffy & Duffy,

2005; Mulla, 2022; Abbas et al., 2023). Through performance-based compensation models such as CPC and PPC, firms can efficiently promote products while minimizing marketing risks and costs (Haikal et al., 2020). Empirical findings further suggest that affiliate marketing positively influences consumer behavior, loyalty, and repeat purchases, all of which are critical drivers of sales growth in competitive digital markets (Giron et al., n.d.; Hani et al., 2020).

Despite these documented benefits, the extent to which affiliate marketing contributes to the sales growth of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) may vary across contexts due to differences in digital infrastructure, managerial expertise, awareness, and market conditions, particularly in developing economies such as Nigeria. In Kaduna State, many SMEs still face challenges related to limited digital marketing skills and constrained access to online platforms, which may moderate the effectiveness of affiliate marketing strategies.

Based on these mixed findings and in line with empirical research conventions, the following null hypothesis is formulated to be tested: H01: Affiliate marketing does not significantly affect SMEs' sales growth in Kaduna State.

2.2 Competitive Intensity and SMEs' Sales Growth

Competitive intensity represents the extent of rivalry faced by firms within an industry and shapes how businesses compete for customers, resources, and market share. Highly competitive intensity often manifests through aggressive pricing, frequent product differentiation, promotional battles, and rapid strategic responses among rival firms. For Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), these pressures can directly influence sales growth by either stimulating strategic adaptation or constraining performance due to limited resources.

Empirical studies suggest that competitive intensity can act as a catalyst for improved performance when firms respond strategically. For instance, Phong (2025) demonstrated that highly competitive intensity, when combined with internal capabilities such as R&D agility, mitigates negative effects on innovation outcomes. This supports the view that competition can encourage firms to innovate, differentiate, and enhance market responsiveness, which may translate into increased sales. Similarly, Yasa, Rahmayanti, and Wijaya (2020) found that competitive intensity motivated SMEs to adopt social media marketing, leading to improved business performance. These findings indicate that competitive pressure can push firms toward growth-oriented strategies that enhance sales outcomes.

Conversely, competitive intensity may also impose performance constraints, particularly for SMEs with limited managerial capacity and financial resources. Assala et al. (2021) emphasized that competition operates at both strategic and tactical levels, suggesting that constant competitive pressure may force SMEs into short-term pricing and promotional strategies that erode margins and restrict sustainable sales growth. Akomea (n.d.) further revealed that competitive intensity plays a dual role, weakening the influence of certain resources such as social capital while strengthening entrepreneurial orientation. This indicates that without appropriate strategic orientation, intense competition may hinder rather than enhance sales growth.

Sales growth remains a critical indicator of firm performance, reflecting market expansion, revenue stability, and long-term viability. While several studies highlight firm-level drivers such as skilled

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labor, productivity, and asset utilization (Warsame, 2023), the competitive environment in which firms operate can either amplify or suppress these drivers. In highly competitive markets, SMEs may struggle to sustain sales growth due to customer switching, price wars, and increased marketing costs, particularly in emerging economies where structural and infrastructural challenges persist.

In the context of Kaduna State, SMEs operate in increasingly competitive markets characterized by product homogeneity, limited differentiation, and resource constraints. Given these conditions and the mixed empirical evidence on the performance effects of competitive intensity, it is appropriate to empirically test the relationship between competitive intensity and SMEs' sales growth. Accordingly, the following null hypothesis is proposed: H02: Competitive intensity does not significantly affect SMEs' sales growth in Kaduna State.

2.3 Competitive Intensity on the Relationship between Affiliate Marketing and Sales Growth

While affiliate marketing has been widely recognized as an effective digital strategy for enhancing customer acquisition, trust, and sales growth, its effectiveness does not occur in isolation from the competitive environment in which firms operate. Competitive intensity shapes how marketing strategies translate into performance outcomes, particularly for SMEs that often operate with limited resources. In highly competitive markets, firms are exposed to intense rivalry through price competition, promotional pressures, and rapid imitation of marketing tactics, which may influence the returns derived from affiliate marketing investments.

Prior studies suggest that competitive intensity can strengthen or weaken the outcomes of firm strategies depending on internal capabilities and market conditions. Phong (2025) demonstrated that competitive intensity, when combined with organizational agility, can attenuate negative performance effects and encourage innovation. This implies that under intense competition, firms may strategically leverage tools such as affiliate marketing more aggressively to protect or expand market share, potentially amplifying its impact on sales growth. Similarly, Yasa, Rahmayanti, and Wijaya (2020) found that competitive pressure motivates SMEs to adopt digital platforms, which subsequently improve business performance, suggesting that competition can intensify the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies.

Conversely, other studies emphasize the constraining role of competitive intensity. Assala et al. (2021) highlighted that sustained rivalry often pushes firms toward tactical actions such as price cuts and heavy promotions, which may dilute the effectiveness of marketing initiatives. Akomea (n.d.) further showed that competitive intensity plays a dual role, weakening certain performance pathways while strengthening others, depending on strategic orientation. For SMEs lacking strong differentiation or digital expertise, intense competition may result in affiliate marketing campaigns being easily replicated by rivals, thereby reducing their marginal contribution to sales growth.

In the context of Kaduna State, SMEs operate in markets characterized by increasing competition, limited product differentiation, and uneven digital capabilities. These conditions suggest that competitive intensity may influence how effectively affiliate marketing translates into sales growth. However, given the mixed empirical evidence regarding the moderating role of competitive intensity, it is necessary to subject this interaction to empirical testing.

Accordingly, the following null hypothesis is proposed: H03: Competitive intensity does not significantly moderate the relationship between affiliate marketing and sales growth of SMEs in Kaduna State.

2.4 Theoretical frameworks

The theory used to underpin this study is dynamic capabilities theory (extension of RBV), SMEs operate in fast-changing, highly competitive markets. Affiliate marketing requires continuous adaptation, learning, and reconfiguration of marketing capabilities. Competitive intensity moderates this because firms with stronger dynamic capabilities can better leverage affiliate marketing in tough markets. Dynamic capabilities are complex systems of actions and resources designed to renew, update, modify, or replace a firm's existing rent-generating resources and capabilities, typically in response to a changing environment (Nooteboom, 2013). According to Teece et al., (2009), stated that Dynamic capabilities and strategic management in organizations indicate that many entrepreneurs do not fully understand what constitutes dynamic resources, are unaware of possessing these resources, and have difficulty identifying competitors or deploying their unique resources at the right moment

Unlike prior studies that often relied on secondary data or literature reviews, the present study focuses directly on SMEs in Kaduna State by collecting data from active managers and owners. Given the highly competitive nature of the 21st-century business environment, competition can act as both an opportunity and a threat. On one hand, it motivates firms to innovate and improve efficiency; on the other, it can erode profitability and weaken outcomes. Building on the reviewed literature, this study investigates competitive intensity as a moderating factor in the relationship between affiliate marketing and sales growth among SMEs in Kaduna State, thereby addressing an empirical gap in understanding how competition shapes marketing-performance linkages in developing economies.

3.0 Methodology

The research design is quantitative and explanatory. The population of the study is two thousand five hundred and six four (2,564) SMEs in Kaduna State that registered with Kaduna State Enterprises Development Agency, Due to the consistently low response rates commonly observed in survey research, Groves (2006) emphasized the importance of researchers taking all necessary steps to minimize non-response. To address this issue, Salkind (2010) recommended increasing the initial sample size by 10–50% to account for potential non-returned questionnaires or uncooperative participants. In line with this, Glenn (2012) suggested that an additional 30% added to the sample size is generally sufficient to offset non-responses. Based on these recommendations, this study increased its original sample size of 340 by 30%. The new sample size was 442 respondents. Accordingly, the study was involved 442 SME owners or managers as its target population. The sampling technique is simple random sampling

The method of data collection is five likert scale questionnaire administer to the owners' managers of SMEs in Kaduna State. The instruments used in this study were adapted from previous studies five items on Affiliate marketing adapted from Alam et al. (2008) and Nagy (2018). Four items on Sales growth were adapted from the work of Muntaha (2022). Four items of competitive intensity were adapted from the study of Ojiambo, (2022). The method of data analysis in this study are measurement model and structural model by the use of Smart PLS4. For the measurement model the study uses Algorithm to find out the validity and reliability of the study and for structural model the study uses the bootstrapping to test the null hypotheses of this study,

4.0 Result and Discussion of Findings

SMART-PLS was used to analyze the data collected for the measurement model and structural equation model (SEM). The study measured the model by examining its Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted in the measurement model. The relationship between affiliate marketing and the sales growth of small and medium-scale enterprises was also examined. Additionally, the study investigated the extent to which the competitive intensity, as an intervening variable, altered the results of the direct relationship between affiliate marketing and SME sales growth in Kaduna State using structural equation modeling (SEM).

Assessment of PLS SEM Measurement Model of Reliability and Validity

The values for Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). According to Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2016), the statistical thresholds for validity and reliability constructs are as follows: Cronbach's alpha must be greater than 0.7, composite reliability must be greater than 0.7, and the values for AVE must be greater than 0.5 in order to be considered statistically acceptable and reliable for the data collection tool.

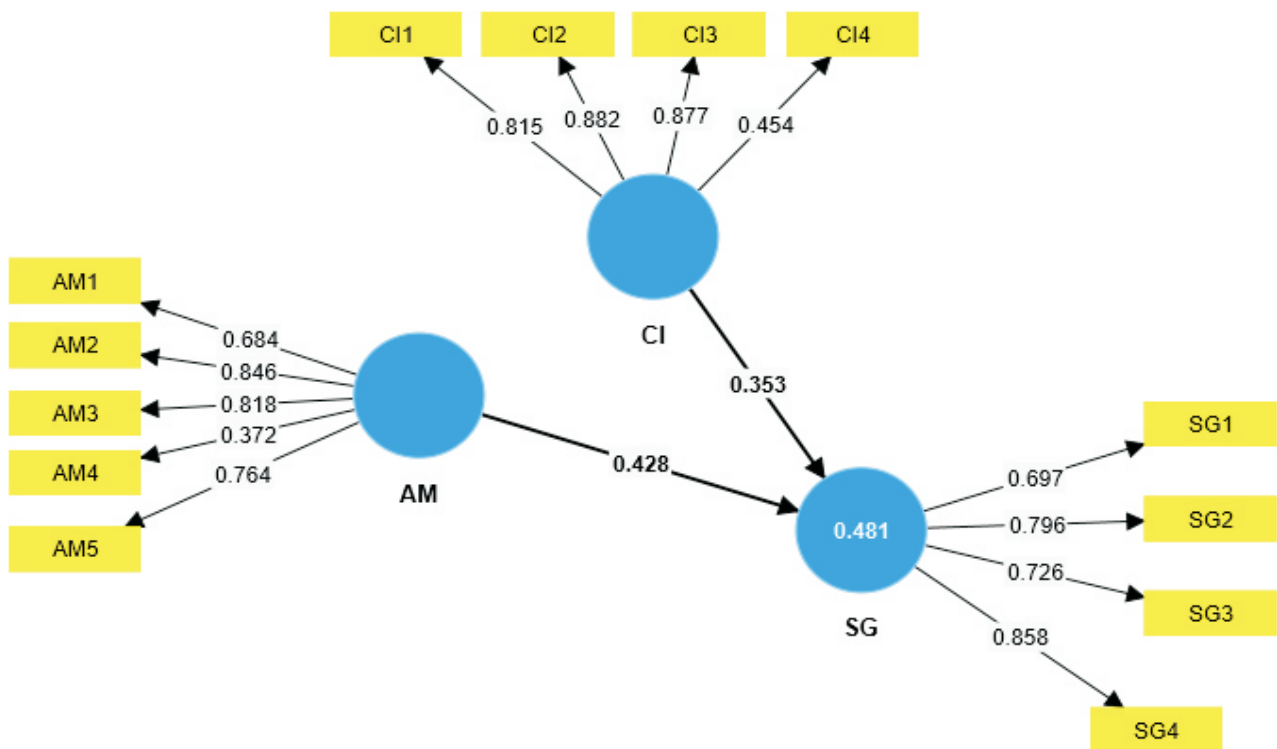


Figure 1 Measurement Model

Table 4. 1 Measurement Model of Reliability and Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	(AVE)
AM	0.762	0.838	0.515
CI	0.765	0.846	0.604
SG	0.773	0.787	0.596

Source: Field Survey, 2025

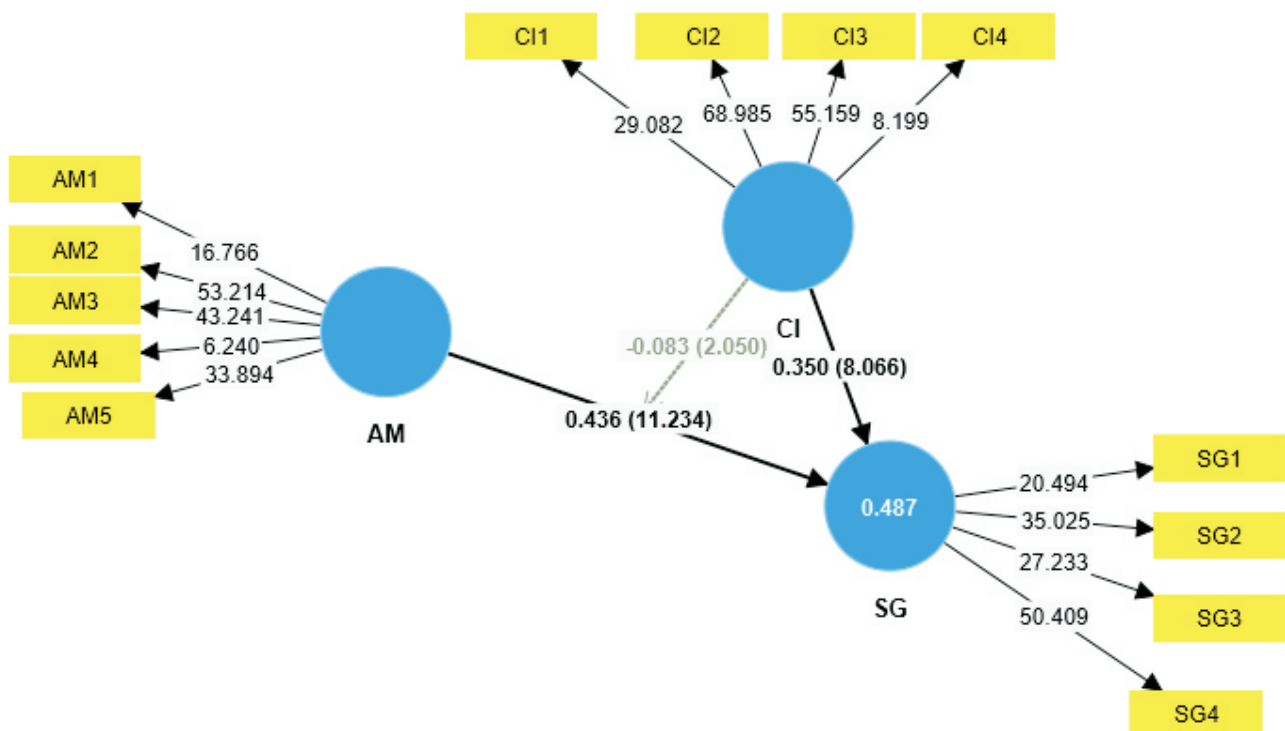
Table 2.1 presents the results of the measurement model assessment in terms of internal consistency reliability and convergent validity. The Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs Affiliate Marketing (AM = 0.762), Competitive Intensity (CI is 0.765), and Sales Growth (SG is 0.773) are all above the threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency among the items measuring each construct. Similarly, the Composite Reliability values for AM (0.838), CI (0.846), and SG (0.787) exceed the recommended benchmark of 0.70, further confirming the reliability of the constructs.

In terms of convergent validity, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for AM (0.515), CI (0.604), and SG (0.596) are all greater than the minimum threshold of 0.50 According to Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2016). This indicates that more than 50% of the variance in the indicators is explained by the underlying latent construct, thus demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity.

The results confirm that the measurement model meets the required standards of reliability and validity, and therefore, the constructs used in this study are statistically sound for subsequent structural model analysis.

Assessment of Significance of the Structural Model

This section presents the structural equation model results for both direct and moderated relationships, analysed using bootstrapping



Note significant at 5% p value

Source: Mart PLS version 4.0.9.9

The structural model analysis revealed that affiliate marketing significantly influences on sales growth among SMEs (β is 0.436, t is 11.234, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicate that the adoption of affiliate marketing strategies substantially enhances SMEs sales growth in Kaduna State, Similarly,

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competitive intensity demonstrated significantly positive effect on sales growth (β is 0.350, t is 8.066, $p < 0.001$), indicating that SMEs operating in highly competitive environments tend to achieve greater sales growth, possibly due to the pressure to innovate. Interestingly, the indirect path competitive intensity statistically significant moderating the relationship between affiliate marketing and sales growth of SMEs in Kaduna State, but was negative effect (β is -0.083 , t is 2.050, $p < 0.040$). This indicates that when competition intensifies, the positive effect of affiliate marketing on sales growth is partially offset. However, SMEs must integrate affiliate marketing with complementary strategies to sustain growth under such conditions.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that affiliate marketing has a positive and significant impact on sales growth of SMEs in Kaduna State. This shows that SMEs which adopt affiliate marketing strategies are more likely to increase their sales growth. This result aligns with the view that digital platforms provide cost-effective and performance-driven opportunities for small businesses to reach wider audiences. The finding is consistent with earlier studies that emphasized the role of affiliate marketing in improving business outcomes through performance-based promotion models (Govoni, 2012; Smith & Chaffey, 2017). By relying on affiliates to promote products and services, SMEs in Kaduna State can achieve growth without incurring heavy upfront advertising costs, thereby enhancing efficiency and competitiveness.

The study further revealed that competitive intensity positive effect on sales growth. This indicates that SMEs in Kaduna State operating in highly competitive environments often experience increased sale growth. One possible explanation is that intense competition forces firms to innovate, adopt aggressive marketing strategies, and improve efficiency, which ultimately translates into higher sales growth. This finding corroborates earlier research (Porter, 1980; Li & Atuahene-Gima, 2001), which shows that competition can stimulate innovation and growth.

Interestingly, the study found that the indirect effect of competitive intensity on sales growth through affiliate marketing was negative and significant. This suggests that while competition directly enhances sales growth, it simultaneously diminishes the contribution of affiliate marketing to growth. In highly competitive markets, affiliates may face reduced commissions, limited profit margins, or price wars that undermine the effectiveness of their promotional activities. This finding provides a nuanced perspective compared to prior studies that reported mainly positive effects of competition on digital marketing performance (Kim & Jones, 2019). It indicates that competition, though beneficial in driving overall sales, may reduce the ability of affiliate marketing alone to sustain growth. Therefore, SMEs may need to integrate affiliate marketing with other contemporary strategies to remain effective in such contexts.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined the influence of affiliate marketing and competitive intensity on the sales growth (SG) of SMEs in Kaduna State. The findings revealed that both affiliate marketing and competitive intensity have significant and positive direct effects on SMEs' sales growth. This confirms that affiliate marketing remains an important digital marketing tool for enhancing performance, while competitive

intensity can stimulate firms to achieve better sales growth. However, the indirect effect of competitive intensity on sales growth in Kaduna State through affiliate marketing was found to be negative and significant. This indicates that although competitive pressure drives sales growth directly, it simultaneously reduces the effectiveness of affiliate marketing in enhancing growth. In essence, while affiliate marketing contributes to sales expansion, its effectiveness may be undermined in highly competitive environments where firms and affiliates face challenges such as price wars, reduced margins, and market saturation. The study offer the following recommendations:

1. In Kaduna State SMEs should continue to leverage affiliate marketing but should focus on building stronger relationships with affiliates, offering competitive incentives, and ensuring affiliates are well-trained to differentiate their promotional efforts.
2. Since competition weakens the impact of affiliate marketing in Kaduna, SMEs in Kaduna are advised to integrate affiliate programs with other digital strategies such as social media marketing, search engine optimization, and content marketing to maximize growth potential.
3. To counteract the negative indirect effect of competitive intensity, SMEs in Kaduna should prioritize differentiation strategies such as brand positioning and superior customer service to ensure that their affiliate programs remain attractive and effective even under high competition.

Suggestion Further Research

Further studies could examine other moderating or mediating variables, such as digital readiness, innovation capability, or customer trust, to provide a more holistic understanding of the conditions under which affiliate marketing is most effective for SMEs.

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