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The impact of marketing strategies on the overall performance of emerging enterprises: an empirical study of MSMEs in the DRC

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of marketing strategies (digital marketing, product differentiation, strategic pricing and distribution channels) on the overall performance of emerging micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Drawing on a sample of 250 MSMEs selected in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, and using econometric modelling via multiple linear regression (MCO), the results reveal a positive and statistically significant relationship between marketing dimensions and overall performance ($R^2 = 0.624$). Digital marketing and distribution strategy emerge as the most powerful determinants. The study offers concrete strategic recommendations for business leaders and public decision-makers to stimulate the Congolese economy.

Keywords: Marketing strategies, MSMEs, Overall performance, Emerging economy, DRC, Econometrics.

1. Introduction

In emerging and developing economies, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) are the central driving force of the socio-economic fabric, accounting for over 80 per cent of both informal and formal employment and a major share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank, 2022). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country characterised by strong demographic growth but facing complex structural challenges, the role of MSMEs is particularly crucial for economic resilience and local value creation (Kalu, 2021).

However, the Congolese operating environment presents unique constraints: macroeconomic instability, restricted access to bank credit, a lack of physical infrastructure and electricity, and increased competition exacerbated by globalisation and informality (Mbuyi & Lukeni, 2020). In this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VICA) environment, the survival and growth of businesses no longer depend solely on the ownership of tangible assets, but lie in their ability to adopt agile and effective strategic approaches.

Among these strategic levers, marketing strategies — encompassing the digitalisation of sales, product differentiation, the optimisation of distribution channels and tailored pricing policies — play a pivotal role. Whilst Western academic literature provides ample evidence of the positive link between marketing and performance (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Porter, 1985), the empirical scope of this relationship within the Congolese entrepreneurial sector remains insufficiently explored and fragmented.

Consequently, the central research question guiding this study is as follows: What is the actual and significant impact of marketing strategies on the overall performance of emerging MSMEs in the DRC?

The main objective of this study is to evaluate, using empirical and econometric methods, the specific contribution of the various components of the strategic marketing mix to the overall performance (financial and non-financial) of MSMEs operating in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. More specifically, the aim is to identify the marketing levers with the most decisive knock-on effect to guide the allocation of these enterprises' limited resources.

2. Study context and theoretical framework

2.1. Entrepreneurial context in the DRC

The DRC offers a unique setting for the study of strategic management. Despite abundant natural resources, MSMEs face an institutionally challenging business environment. According to the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and SMEs (2023), over 70 per cent of start-ups fail before their fifth year of operation. The causes of this vulnerability include a limited grasp of modern management tools, a lack of foothold in target markets, and a reactive rather than strategic approach to the market. The advent of mobile technologies (M-Pesa, Orange Money) and the growing adoption of social media have, however, opened up new opportunities for low-cost digital marketing for urban MSMEs.

2.2. Theoretical framework and literature review

To conceptualise the relationship between marketing strategy and performance, this study draws on two major theories of strategic management:

1. The Resource-Based View (RBV): Developed by Barney (1991), the RBV posits that firms achieve a sustainable competitive advantage by accumulating valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources and capabilities. Marketing capabilities (customer knowledge, brand image, control of the distribution network) are regarded as essential dynamic capabilities that guarantee superior performance (Teece et al., 1997).

2. The Balanced Scorecard: A company's performance cannot be limited solely to financial accounting indicators (turnover, profitability). In line with the work of Kaplan & Norton (1996) and Vorhies & Harker (2000), we adopt a multidimensional approach to overall performance combining: (i) financial performance (turnover growth, operating margin), (ii) commercial performance (customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, market share), and (iii) operational performance (brand awareness, sales efficiency).

Based on these theoretical foundations, we formulate the general hypothesis (H_g) that marketing strategies have a positive and significant influence on the overall performance of MSMEs in the DRC, subdivided into four sub-hypotheses corresponding to the marketing mix (H1: Product differentiation, H2: Strategic pricing, H3: Distribution channels, H4: Digital marketing).

3. Research methodology

3.1. Sampling and data collection

The study is based on an empirical quantitative approach, conducted via a questionnaire survey administered to managers, owners and marketing managers of MSMEs based in two major economic hubs of the DRC: Kinshasa (the political and commercial capital) and Lubumbashi (the mining and industrial capital). Data collection took place between September and December 2025. Of the 300 questionnaires distributed using a stratified random sampling method, 250 usable responses were retained (response rate of 83.3 per cent).

3.2. Measurement of variables

All variables were measured using 5-point Likert scales (ranging from 1 = 'Strongly disagree' to 5 = 'Strongly agree').

Variable	Type	Measurement indicators (Items)
Overall Performance (PERF)	Dependent	Revenue growth, profitability, customer satisfaction, market share ($\alpha = 0.88$)
Product Differentiation (DIFF)	Independent	Perceived quality, product innovation, packaging, branding ($\alpha = 0.81$)
Pricing Strategy (PRICE)	Independent	Competitive pressure, psychological pricing, price flexibility ($\alpha = 0.78$)
Distribution & Digital (DIST & DIG)	Independent	Geographical coverage, social media, Mobile Money, delivery ($\alpha = 0.85$)

Source: author, based on their research

3.3. Specification of the econometric model

In order to analyse the impact of marketing strategies on overall performance, a multiple linear regression model estimated using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method is formulated as follows:

$$\mathbf{PERFi = \beta0 + \beta1\ DIFFi + \beta2\ PRIXi + \beta3\ DISTi + \beta4\ DIGi + \beta5\ TAILLEi + \varepsilon i}$$

Where:

- PERF represents the overall performance index of MSME i;
- DIFF is the product differentiation strategy;
- PRICE is the price alignment/flexibility strategy;
- DIST represents distribution channel coverage;
- DIG measures the degree of adoption of digital marketing;
- SIZE is a control variable (logarithm of the number of employees);
- β_0 is the constant,
- β_1 to β_5 are the regression coefficients to be estimated, and
- ε_i is the stochastic error term.

4. Results of the study

4.1. Socio-demographic profile and characteristics of MSMEs

The sample comprises 54 per cent micro-enterprises (1 to 5 employees), 32 per cent small enterprises (6 to 20 employees) and 14 per cent medium-sized enterprises (21 to 100 employees). The sectors represented are retail trade (41 per cent), services (35 per cent), agro-processing (15 per cent) and crafts/light industry (9 per cent).

4.2. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and Pearson's correlation matrix between the main variables of the study.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Matrix of the Study Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	1. PERF	2. DIFF	3. DIG
1. PERF	3.62	0.74	1,000	-	-
2. DIFF	3.85	0.68	0.512***	1,000	-
3. PRICE	3.41	0.82	0.384**	0.291**	-
4. DIST	3.77	0.71	0.589***	0.410***	0.325**
5. DIG	3.91	0.89	0.641***	0.485***	0.502***

*Note: *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05. Source: Survey results (2025/2026).*

4.3. Results of the econometric regression

The results of the OLS estimation of the overall performance model are summarised in Table 2 below. Diagnostic tests confirm the absence of severe multicollinearity (average VIFs < 2.1) and the normality of the residuals.

Table 2. OLS Regression Results for the Determinants of MSMEs' Overall Performance

Independent variables	Unstandardised Coefficients (B)	Standard Error	Standardised Coefficient (Beta)	t-value (p-value)
(Constant)	0.812	0.215	-	3.77 (0.000)
Product Differentiation (DIFF)	0.224	0.058	0.218	3.86 (0.000) ***
Pricing Strategy (PRICE)	0.115	0.049	0.112	2.34 (0.020) **
Distribution Channels (DIST)	0.281	0.061	0.275	4.60 (0.000) ***
Digital Marketing (DIG)	0.342	0.055	0.358	6.21 (0.000) ***
Company Size (SIZE)	0.084	0.038	0.089	2.21 (0.028) **

$R^2 = 0.624$ | Adjusted $R^2 = 0.616$ | F-statistic = 81.12 ($p < 0.000$) | N = 250

**** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05. Dependent variable: Overall performance (PERF).*

The results indicate that the model explains 62.4 per cent of the variance in the overall performance of MSMEs ($R^2 = 0.624$, F = 81.12, $p < 0.001$). All components of the marketing strategy have a positive and statistically significant impact on performance:

• **Digital Marketing (Beta = 0.358, p < 0.001):** Has the strongest effect. A one-unit increase in the use of digital channels increases overall performance by 0.342 points.

• **Distribution Channels (Beta = 0.275, p < 0.001):** This is the second most influential factor, highlighting the critical importance of product availability in a decentralised urban environment.

• **Product Differentiation (Beta = 0.218, p < 0.001):** Confirms that perceived quality and brand protect MSMEs from price wars.

• **Pricing Strategy (Beta = 0.112, p = 0.020):** Has a significant but more moderate impact, reflecting the limited scope for price adjustments in the face of constrained purchasing power.

5. Discussion of the results

The empirical findings of this study confirm the applicability of modern strategic management theories (RBV and Dynamic Capabilities) to the specific context of emerging enterprises in Central Africa. The predominant impact of digital marketing ($\beta = 0.358$) can be explained by the 'leapfrog' technological advancement offered by mobile phones in the DRC. Given the high cost of traditional media (television, billboards), social media (WhatsApp Business, Facebook) and mobile money solutions provide MSMEs with a direct, interactive and affordable channel for acquiring and retaining customers.

The significance of distribution (β = 0.275) reflects the logistical reality in the DRC. In congested cities such as Kinshasa, an MSME's ability to bring its products closer to the consumer (via collection points or home delivery) constitutes a decisive competitive advantage that goes beyond mere price competition.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings are consistent with the work of Vorhies & Harker (2000) and Kalu (2021), demonstrating that developing specific marketing skills enables businesses to circumvent institutional failures in the business environment. In practical terms, they suggest that Congolese entrepreneurs should prioritise reallocating their limited marketing budgets towards the digitalisation of customer relations and the optimisation of logistics.

Conclusion and recommendations

This academic study set out to empirically analyse the impact of marketing strategies on the overall performance of emerging MSMEs in the DRC. The econometric estimates carried out on a sample of 250 firms confirm that the adoption of an appropriate strategic marketing mix is a key determinant of survival and growth in a complex emerging environment.

Based on these findings, three main recommendations are put forward:

1. For MSME managers: Prioritise digital business transformation by systematically integrating mobile payments and customer relationship management via social media.

2. For support organisations (incubators, FEC): Develop capacity-building programmes focused on operational marketing, simplified market research and product packaging.

3. For public authorities (Ministry of SMEs): Improve logistics infrastructure and reduce internet connection costs to lower the cost of commercial transactions for start-ups.

The limitations of this research lie in its geographical focus on Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. Future studies would benefit from extending the sample to rural areas and adopting a longitudinal approach to observe the sustainability of these impacts over time.

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