

INFLUENCE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON ENHANCING COMMUNICATION AND DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS AMONG SME OPERATORS IN ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The research work examined the influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on enhancing communication and digital literacy skills among SMEs operators in Anambra State, Nigeria. Two research questions guided the study. The survey research design was adopted for this study. A total of 105 respondents (SME operators) in Anambra State were selected using accidental sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Influence of AI on Enhancing Communication and digital literacy Skills among SME Operators Questionnaire" and was on a five-point scale. The instrument's reliability, validated by three experts, was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.86 and 0.79. Weighted mean analysis was used to interpret the data. The findings of the study revealed that AI plays a vital role in enhancing communication and digital literacy skills among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria. Consequently, it was recommended that SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria, should leverage AI-powered tools to enhance communication skill and invest in Ai-powered training programmes to enhance digital marketing skill.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, SMEs, communication skill, digital literacy skill, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Introduction

The existence of small businesses in different nations is crucial to their growth and development. Over the years, SMEs have been observed to play a role in the job and employment creation changing aspects of countries. This position was highlighted by Bandari (2019), who stated that SMEs are of significant importance in the economy as they make substantial contributions to employment generation, innovation, and overall economic expansion. They frequently serve as primary catalysts for economic expansion within communities, as they generate employment opportunities and offer local citizens avenues for economic advancement. They are also agents of innovation and creativity in many economies, as they respond more swiftly to environmental discontinuities (Bandari, 2019). According to Ayozie, Jacob and Umukoro (2017), enterprises could be in three different forms: Small scale, medium scale or large scale. The present study is concerned with small-scale enterprise operators.

In today's fast-paced business environment, entrepreneurs require a multifaceted skill set beyond traditional entrepreneurship qualities to ensure growth and survival. Effective business owners and operators must possess creative leadership and entrepreneurship skills, enabling them to identify new opportunities, take calculated risks, and innovate (Leib, 2011). The competitive environment demands strong-willed enterprises that adapt to disruptions and uncertainties, driven by technological innovations like Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Ambulkar, Blackhurst, and Grawe, 2015). Failure to evolve increases vulnerability to disruption, while embracing change and innovation ensures long-term success.

According to Helm, Swiergosz, Haeberle, Karnuta, Schaffer, Krebs and Ramkumar (2020), AI is on everyone's lips and will (many authors in theory and practice agree) dominate the coming years of business. It appears new to many people; however, it can be traced back to 1956 at the Dartmouth College United States conference, when it was presented by renowned scholars (Iqbal and Khan, 2021). It has since taken center stage in many fields, including medicine, engineering, and finance. In contemporary times, the domain of AI has emerged as a significant subject of investigation across a wide range of disciplines, including engineering, science, education, medicine, business, accounting, finance, marketing, economics, stock markets, and law (Stefanuk and Zhzhikashvili, 2002).

Many small businesses in Africa seem to view AI as being the exclusive preserve for big businesses that can afford it; they see it as being very expensive and requiring technical manoeuvring to delve into it. However, this has been seen to be an incorrect notion, as many small businesses have been applying some aspect of AI to their advantage. Delponte, Mahidhar and Davenport (2018) point out that scholars and certain entrepreneurs have refuted the notion that AI is the exclusive preservation of big firms, asserting that even modest enterprises possess the capacity to implement technologies in certain facets of their operations, notwithstanding their inability to create or possess

those technologies. Similarly, Iansiti and Lakhani (2020) posit that numerous entrepreneurs possess convenient access to AI solutions because these solutions have transitioned from futuristic and exclusive breakthroughs to being readily accessible at a reasonably low cost. This suggests that AI technology accessibility is no longer limited to large corporations.

Based on the foregoing, it is without doubt that the influence of AI on enhancing communication and digital literacy skills among SME operators is pivotal for the promotion and survival of business enterprises. Communication is what transforms an idea into a vision, defines how it's different, explains why it will work, and engages people in helping to make it a reality. According to Heller and Cheryl (2011), communication skill is a primary means whereby SMEs operators achieve the desired levels of excellence in the development of their organizations. SMEs operators should be charismatic leaders and through their ability to communicate their vision unequivocally, they should be able to organize a team. A charismatic leader will positively have an inspiring effect on both organizational and follower outcomes.

On the other hand, digital literacy encompasses the understanding, mindset, and proficiency of individuals in effectively utilizing digital devices, as well as their capacity to discern, access, manipulate, integrate, access, analyze, and combine diverse digital resources in a meaningful and appropriate manner (Yuan, Liu and Kuang, 2021). It involves the holistic mastery of digital skills and competencies that enable individuals to navigate and engage with the digital landscape in a knowledgeable, responsible, and productive manner. According to Suriwulan et al. (2020), digital literacy holds the utmost importance in the contemporary era dominated by digital advancements. It encompasses the skill set required to adeptly utilize digital technology while ensuring safety, wisdom, and productivity in its usage. Nyoman, Pertam and Anggiriawan (2022) averred that the growth and success of entrepreneurs can be greatly bolstered through the cultivation of digital literacy. This entails fostering proficiency in forging digital business connections, leveraging online resources and amenities, and harnessing the power of expansive networks. Digital literacy is having a profound impact on company structures, the way work is carried out and managed, and the skills needed in the workplace. It is also changing our expectations of company owners (Ojemaogha, 2019).

In the case of Anambra State, Okpochefo and Alika (2017) opined that a well-managed and healthy enterprise by operators constitutes significant sources of applying the needed skills to grow their businesses through the aid of AI. While the citizens benefit in terms of employment and income, government also benefits by generating revenue in form of taxes which is a strong factor to social stability. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the above revelation justifies this study - the influence of AI on enhancing communication and digital literacy skills among SME operators. Although there are literature on the influence of AI in entrepreneurial development and so on, but to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there has not been any work addressing the influence of AI on enhancing communication and digital literacy skills among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria. This gap stated above was what this study addressed.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid digital transformation necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the pressing need for small and medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Anambra State, Nigeria, to develop robust communication and digital literacy skills. However, SME operators in the region face significant challenges in adopting and leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance their digital capabilities, thereby hindering their ability to compete effectively in the global market.

The dearth of research on the specific role of AI in improving communication and digital literacy skills among Anambra State's SME operators necessitates an in-depth investigation. This knowledge gap obscures the potential benefits of AI-driven solutions, leaving SMEs vulnerable to digital exclusion and diminished competitiveness. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the influence of AI on communication and digital literacy skills among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research question guided the study:

1. What is the influence of AI in enhancing Communication skill among SME operators in Anambra state?

2. What is the influence of AI in enhancing Digital literacy skill among SME operators in Anambra state?

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: The Schematic Representation of the Study Concept.



Source: Authors (2024)

The influence of AI on enhancing communication and digital literacy skills among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria. The concept above shows that AI-powered tools refine communication skills through automated customer service, sentiment analysis, and personalized marketing, enabling SME leaders to connect effectively with their audience. AI platforms also cultivate digital literacy, empowering leaders to leverage data analytics, online marketplaces, and digital payments, streamlining operations and expanding reach.

Literature Review

Artificial intelligence (AI) is causing a revolution in business as well as the economy and society as a whole by changing the interactions and relationships that exist between stakeholders and individuals. According to AI for Europe (2018) AI systems can be fully software-based and work in a virtual world, for example, voice assistants, image analysis software, search engines, speech and facial recognition systems. On the other hand, they can also be embedded in hardware, for example, in advanced robots, autonomous cars, drones or Internet applications. The term intelligence is defined in traditional disciplines such as psychology and philosophy. Today we combine intelligence into cognitive science, which has tried to combine psychology and AI with philosophy, neuroscience, linguistics, etc. Cognitive science is an interdisciplinary scientific study of the mind and its processes. It explores many aspects of human mental functions, such as reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making, and planning. The author says most of us would agree to be a model of intelligent action, whether artificial or natural (Fox, 2019).

According to Mir, Qadri, and Hassan (2014), the basis of today's technological advances, generated and promoted in particular by the ever-faster development of modern technology, hardware and software and the computer and information business models are based on previous inventions such as the steam machine, the typewriter, the telephone, electricity. AI is transforming various aspects of our lives, and its impact is evident in numerous industries and applications. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the ability of machines to do what intelligent humans do. This is a manifestation of the cognitive abilities of machines. In academia, it encompasses the study of how digital computers and algorithms undertake tasks and address intricate problems that typically require human intelligence, reasoning, and predictive capabilities to adapt to dynamic situations (Giuggioli and Pellegrini, 2023). Arakpogun, Elsahn, Olan, and Elsahn (2021) aver that AI is a collection of Information and Communication Technologies that imitate human intelligence. It enables machines to perform cognitive functions previously associated only with human minds (Rai, Constantinides and Sarker, 2019).

There exist numerous definitions to the term “small scale enterprise” According to Onuoha (2017), a small scale enterprise is defined as a business which is independent, small in size and often localized. Most small scale businesses are operated by private individuals or group of individuals. In addition, Nicholas (2018) added that small scale enterprise is said to be a firm that is independently owned and operated and which is not dominant in its field of operation. Small and medium scale enterprises are undeniably critical to the growth and development of the global economy (Erdem, 2011). Small scale enterprise is very important in the society. The small scale businesses have the potentiality to reduce the rate of unemployment in Nigeria and thus to contribute to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and economic growth of the nation (Oshagbemi, 2019). In the same light, Onuoha (2018), sees a small-scale enterprise (SME) as one that is independently owned and operated, and in which the owner is the sole decision maker and the overall boss. The dynamic role of small scale enterprises in developing countries has been highly beneficial. Small scale enterprise are the

backbone of the economy, they also have a big role to play in sustainable development (Šebestová and Sroka, 2020). Faltin (2018) added that small scale enterprises diversifies the economy and society and expands the range of future alternatives.

Communication skills refer to the ability to effectively convey and receive information, ideas, and thoughts through various channels, including verbal, non-verbal, written, and visual means (Bolton, 2020). Communication involves not only transmitting information but also ensuring that the intended message is received and understood by the recipient (Dumbrava, 2022). In the same vein, Robbins and Judge (2020), opined that communication skills encompass three key components: encoding (transmitting the message), decoding (interpreting the message), and feedback (responding to the message). Developing strong communication skills is crucial in today's fast-paced, technology-driven world, where clear and concise communication can make or break personal and professional relationships. In contemporary time, communication skills have become increasingly complex, with the rise of remote work, social media, and instant messaging (Hynes, 2021). As noted by Guffey and Loewy (2020), effective communicators must adapt to diverse audiences, cultures, and contexts, leveraging emotional intelligence, active listening, and empathy to build trust and foster collaboration. Moreover, communication skills are linked to leadership success, with research indicating that leaders who communicate effectively are more likely to inspire employee engagement and drive organizational performance (Bass, 2020). By cultivating strong communication skills, individuals can navigate the complexities of personal and professional interactions, achieving greater success and building stronger relationships.

Digital literacy skills refer to the ability to effectively use digital technologies to access, evaluate, create, and communicate information (Hobbs, 2017). This encompasses a range of competencies, including technical skills (e.g., software proficiency), information literacy (e.g., critical evaluation of online sources), and media literacy (e.g., understanding online discourse) (Koltay, 2020). According to the American Library Association (2020), digital literacy involves "the ability to use digital tools to facilitate learning, communication, and productivity." In today's digital landscape, individuals with strong digital literacy skills can navigate online platforms, utilize digital tools, and participate fully in the digital economy. The importance of digital literacy skills cannot be overstated, particularly in the context of the modern workforce (Valtonen et al., 2020). As noted by Eshet-Alkalai (2017), digital literacy is essential for effective online communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Moreover, digital literacy skills are linked to improved academic performance, increased employability, and enhanced civic engagement (Mills, 2018). The European Commission (2020) emphasizes that digital literacy is a key component of the "digital competence" framework, essential for individuals to thrive in the digital age. By developing digital literacy skills, individuals can unlock opportunities, enhance their productivity, and participate fully in the digital society.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the contingency theory pioneered by Austrian psychologist Fred Edward Fiedler in his landmark 1964 article "A Contingency Model of Leadership Effectiveness." The theory posits that business leaders need to adjust leadership styles based on the situation at hand. It becomes a balance of a business leader's natural style and understanding when and where it needs to be altered. Contingency theorists are of the view that leadership decisions and actions are contingent on the internal and external determinants based on situations that are present. Contingency theory acknowledges the fact that leadership plays a vital role in business setups because it helps the business information through observation and firsthand experience that are vital in bringing development or new ideas that will foster growth in a business setup.

The contingency theory is applicable to this because given the challenges small scale entrepreneurs face, contingency theory provides a framework to shed light on the responsive and flexible nature of small and medium business operators to the quagmires they face. Contingent leaders seek to have a rational understanding of the situation that arises and adjust their behaviour, subsequently adopting a leadership style that is most appropriate to solving the situation which is where Artificial Intelligence comes in. Also, the application of this theory offers practical and tactical responses because through the usage of Artificial Intelligence, communication and digital literacy skills can be enhanced among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria, boost the business input and output of small-scale.

Method

Descriptive survey research design is adopted for this study. This study was conducted in Anambra State, located in the south eastern region of Nigeria. The population of this study was 1,051 SME operators in Anambra state. This population was identified through data obtained from Anambra Small Business Agency (ASBA) in collaboration with the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN). This study used Accidental Sampling as a method of collecting samples. Accidental sampling is a sampling technique in which a researcher who accidentally meets the respondents and if it fits the criteria of the researcher, then they would be chosen as participants (Sugiyono, 2015). Therefore, the sampling size obtained by this method was 105 SME operators in Anambra State. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire, developed by the researcher. The instrument was titled “Influence of AI on Enhancing Communication and digital literacy Skills among SME Operators Questionnaire” utilizing a five-point scale. The instrument was subjected to validation by three experts. Cronbach alpha method was used to test the internal consistency of the instrument, resulting in the reliability coefficient of 0.86 and 0.79. The researcher, with the assistance of two research assistants, administered the questionnaire to the respondents. Weighted mean analysis was used to interpret the data.

Results

The results are presented in the order of the research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the influence of AI in enhancing communication skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean scores of respondents on the influence of AI in enhancing Communication skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria

S/N	AI and Communication Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remark
1.	AI virtual assistants helps SME operators with communication skills such as email management, scheduling, and customer service	4.75	0.31	Strongly Agreed
2.	AI translation tools helps SME operators communicate with customers and partners who speak different languages	4.40	0.07	Agreed
3.	AI helps SME operators understand customer feedback and sentiment, enabling them to respond effectively.	4.10	0.02	Agreed
4.	AI-powered tools can help SME operators provide 24/7 support to customer.	3.45	0.52	Neutral
5.	AI help SME operators track and analyze their communication effectiveness	3.75	0.14	Agreed
6.	AI helps identify areas of improvement in communication	4.55	0.17	Strongly Agreed
	Grand Mean	4.16		Agreed

Data in Table 1 above show that every other item from 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, obtain mean scores above the mean criterion for this study 3. With a grand mean of 4.16. The standard deviation also ranges from 0.02 to 0.52 which indicated that the responses were closely related. This implies that AI plays a vital role in influencing communication skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Research Question 2: What is the influence of AI in enhancing digital literacy skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean scores of respondents on the influence of AI in enhancing Digital literacy skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria

S/N	AI and Digital Literacy Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remark
7.	AI helps SME operators in enhancing digital marketing skills	4.54	0.10	Strongly Agreed
8.	AI helps SME operators in understanding of digital tools needed in improving their businesses	4.22	0.25	Agreed
9.	AI helps SME operators with better data analysis for interpretation of business activities	4.48	0.27	Agreed
10.	AI helps SME operators with improved online customer service	4.60	0.15	Strongly Agreed
11.	AI helps SME operators with e-commerce online sales	2.67	0.34	Neutral
12.	AI helps SME operators with cybersecurity for their businesses	4.30	0.20	Agreed
Grand Mean		4.13		Agreed

Data in Table 2 above show that every other item from 7, 8, 9, 10 and 12, obtain mean scores above the mean criterion for this study 3.00, while item 11 obtains mean score below the mean criterion for this study 3.00, with a grand mean of 4.13. The standard deviation also ranges from 0.10 to 0.34 which indicated that the responses were closely related. This implies that AI plays a vital role in influencing digital literacy skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study on the influence of played by AI in enhancing communication skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria, revealed that Artificial Intelligence (AI) significantly enhances communication skills among Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) operators by streamlining various aspects of customer interaction. AI virtual assistants improve email management, scheduling, and customer service, while AI translation tools facilitate communication with diverse language-speaking customers and partners. Additionally, AI-driven sentiment analysis enables SMEs to understand customer feedback and respond effectively. AI-powered tools provide round-the-clock support, ensuring timely issue resolution. Furthermore, AI-powered analytics track and evaluate communication effectiveness, identifying areas for improvement. SME operators can optimize their communication strategies, boost customer satisfaction, and drive business growth by adopting and utilizing AI tools. This finding aligns with Getchell et al. (2022) who emphasized that AI technology is gaining popularity in the business world due to its various advantages. On the one hand, the adoption of AI-powered communication tools can enhance the speed, accuracy, and efficiency of communication within organizations.

The findings of this study on the roles played by AI in enhancing digital literacy skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria revealed that Artificial Intelligence (AI) revolutionizes digital literacy among Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) operators by enhancing their digital marketing skills, understanding of essential digital tools, and data analysis capabilities. AI empowers SMEs to optimize online customer service, streamline e-commerce sales, and safeguard their businesses with robust cybersecurity measures. In addition, AI-driven insights enable SMEs to interpret business activities effectively, make data-driven decisions, and stay competitive in the digital landscape. Therefore, SME operators can utilize AI to bridge the digital divide, upgrade their digital proficiency, and drive business growth through improved online presence, customer engagement, and operational efficiency. Eventually, AI will transform SMEs into digitally savvy entities, equipped to thrive in today's technology-driven economy. This findings aligns with Forbes (2022) findings which states that AI enhances SMEs' digital marketing strategies through predictive analytics and personalized customer engagement.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that AI plays a vital role in enhancing communication skill and digital literacy skill among SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria. SME operators can optimize communication strategies, bridge the digital divide, drive business growth, and achieve scalable success when they utilize AI tools.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended that SME operators in Anambra State, Nigeria, should leverage AI-powered tools to enhance communication skill and invest in AI-powered training programmes to enhance digital marketing skills.

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