





## Examining the Influence of Social Media Marketing Activities on the Performance of SMEs in Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of social media marketing activities (SMMA) on the performance of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in Zimbabwe. The study employed a descriptive survey research design using a self-administered questionnaire. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis. The study sample comprised 384 SME owners/managers in three cities in Zimbabwe. The results show that SMMA affected SME performance. The results also indicate that the SMMA that an SME undertakes has a positive impact on financial and non-financial performance of SMEs. The findings reveal that interactivity had a significant positive effect on brand awareness and brand visibility by consumers, which improves SME financial performance. In addition, entertainment, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), and customisation have a statistically significant positive influence on the SME's performance. The study concluded that SMMA positively influence SME performance. The study recommends that marketing professionals use SMMA based on the desired marketing objective. Thus, incorporating entertainment, customisation, and e-WOM activities can achieve a high level of non-financial performance for the SME. Using activities that stimulate interaction with the brand's social media platforms accomplishes a high level of SME performance.

Article Type: Original

OPEN ACCESS



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Received:

5 May, 2025

Revised:

8 August, 2025

Accepted:

29 August, 2025

Published:

30 September, 2025

**Keywords:** *social media, social media marketing, social media marketing activities (SMMA), performance, small-to-medium enterprises*

**JEL Classification:** *L81, L82, L86, M31, M37*

**How to cite this article (APA):** Maireva, C., Mutanda, B., Chafadza, C., & Mabika, P. (2025). Examining the Influence of Social Media Marketing Activities on the Performance of SMEs in Zimbabwe. *JISR management and social sciences & economics*, 23(3), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.31384/jisrmsse/2025.23.3.1>

## INTRODUCTION

Social media (SM) has a ubiquitous presence in the day-to-day lives of consumers and businesses. In the face of increased internet access globally, many businesses, large and small alike, have transitioned to the online marketplace (Kikawa et al., 2022; Lestari et al., 2024; Syaifullah et al., 2021). The power of the internet has brought considerable and unprecedented changes to consumer behaviour and lifestyles (Sano, 2014; Takit & Setiawan, 2025). The technological advances have left an indelible mark on nearly every aspect of human existence (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Additionally, online shopping and e-commerce have undergone a metamorphosis, resulting in rapid expansion and becoming the most preferred means of purchasing goods (Yang et al., 2017).

Small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in emerging economies are prepared to use SM platforms to market their products and improve business performance (Billi & Bernardo, 2025). Social media networking (SMN) has taken person-to-person, consumer-to-consumer (C2C), consumer-to-business (C2B), business-to-business (B2B), and business-to-consumer (B2C) relationships to a level of unprecedented real-time, online interactions and massive electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). SMEs need to tap into this powerful communication tool and relationship marketing to reap the benefits of such relations and improve their financial and non-financial performance (Billi & Bernardo, 2025; Keasey et al., 2025; Tarabieh, 2022).

Despite the growing adoption of social media marketing activities (SMMA) among SMEs, empirical evidence on how these activities influence SME performance remains limited and fragmented. Many SMEs invest in social media platforms without a clear understanding of which marketing activities, such as interactivity, informativeness, trendiness, customisation, and word-of-mouth facilitation, most effectively drive customer engagement, brand visibility, and sales growth. This lack of clarity constrains strategic decision-making and leads to inefficient allocation of scarce marketing resources. Therefore, there is a need to examine the extent to which SMMA influence SME performance, particularly in resource-constrained environments where digital marketing capabilities vary widely.

SM has become a vital component of most firms' marketing strategy; yet studies on SM variables and their impact on the marketing of goods and services are still limited (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Kim & Ko, 2012; Kontu & Vecchi, 2014; Tarabieh, 2022), especially in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Hence, there is a need to study the influence of social media marketing activities (SMMA) on the performance of SMEs in the face of increased use of e-commerce and m-commerce, with most firms selling their goods and services online (Hanaysha,

2022; Qalati et al., 2022). This study is also necessary given the prevalence of information and communication technologies, mobile technologies, and the growth of online marketplaces. It comes against the backdrop of increased mobile phone penetration rates and enhanced access to the internet by billions of people globally. Given ubiquitous access to the internet and the prevalence of SM networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp, companies have taken full advantage of the potential of these platforms to market their products (Eze et al., 2021; Orji et al., 2022).

Social media marketing (SMM) is about how to gain awareness, drive traffic, and engage customers and prospects using social media channels (Fu et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2024). The importance of SM can be witnessed by the number of active users on social media platforms, which stands at over half of the world population, with 4.5 billion people accessing the internet (Kemp, 2020). Given such a huge customer base and potential for strong sales, SM is quite popular among individual users and businesses that can utilise it as a marketing communication medium (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Fu et al., 2024). In addition, Godey et al. (2016) argue that SM is one of the best prospects for companies and organisations to remain in direct contact with their customers.

In a report, Yadav and Rahman (2017) showed that 88 per cent of companies surveyed in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) and retail, media, ICTs, and travel and leisure sectors had embraced SM and were using different SM platforms to market their products. 42% of these companies had fully integrated different SM platforms into their day-to-day marketing strategies. In addition, 39% of the SM platform users used it to get information on various products and services. Ismail (2017) found that almost 63% and 19% of millennials like and/or follow brands on Facebook and Twitter, respectively. Kontu and Vecchi (2014) also posit that SM provides shoppers a voice and facilitates interaction and sharing of their opinions worldwide.

Given the dynamic nature and shifting trends taking place regularly and within short periods, the use of SMM is important to the success of any business (Fu et al., 2024; Kontu & Vecchi, 2014; Tajvidi & Karami, 2021). This is more so for SMEs with constrained marketing budgets, given the exorbitant cost of traditional marketing media such as magazines, newspapers, radio, and television. SMEs face stiff competition from established brands with strong finances to finance their marketing campaigns. SM presents SMEs with an opportunity to market their products and services to a wider market.

While several studies (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Eze et al., 2021; Fu et al., 2024; Hanaysha, 2022; Lestari et al., 2024; Orji et al., 2022; Qalati et al., 2022) have been carried out on SMM and the specific SMMA, this study builds on existing knowledge in the field of SMM. It also examines the relationship between SMMA

and the performance of SMEs in an emerging economy setting where mobile penetration is not as high as in the developed world. The findings can enable SMEs to identify the additional potential uses of the SM activities and to reach optimised media content that suits both the target audience and their marketing strategies. SMEs must take advantage of the ubiquitous marketplace to sell their products, given the increased mobile phone penetration and use of internet-based SMN by consumers (Billi & Bernardo, 2025; Keasey et al., 2025).

SMEs must embrace SMMA to increase their market presence, enhance product visibility, and constantly engage with consumers to increase sales. Ultimately, an increase in sales will result in improved performance of the SMEs (Qalati et al., 2022). A well-conceived SM marketing strategy and supporting activities have the potential to improve the financial performance of a firm (Orji et al., 2022). Thus, this study sought to achieve the following questions in the context of an emerging economy like Zimbabwe:

1. What is the effect of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on the performance of SMEs?
2. Does entertainment influence SME performance?
3. How does trendiness affect SME performance?
4. What is the relationship between customisation and SME performance?
5. How does the interactivity of SMM platforms affect SME performance?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A study by Kim and Ko (2012) proposed a framework to explore how SMMA can enhance customer equity. In their study, they identified five variables, namely entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and positive e-WOM, which they used to evaluate the effect of SMMA on luxury fashion brands. It is these variables that this study adopts to examine the influence of SMMA on the performance of SMEs.

### *Entertainment*

Entertainment represents the enjoyable and fun experience that an SM user obtains, mainly triggered by their hedonistic motivation Seo and Park (2018). SM users seek amusement and pleasure (Godey et al., 2016). Muntinga et al. (2011) found that entertainment is a key motivator for customers to engage in online brand-related activities. Touchette et al. (2015) also show that the type of branded entertainment posts on Facebook, in order of popularity, were found

to be advertisements/photos, online interactivity, sweepstakes, audio/video, contests, events/festivals, and downloads/uploads. In this study, entertainment was measured by the perceived degree of fun and enjoyment that an SM user derives from visiting and interacting with the SM pages of the SMEs.

### ***Interactivity***

Interactivity is the extent to which users participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time (Touchette et al., 2015). It refers to how followers of a firm on SM contribute to its page activities, through commenting, liking, posting, re-tweeting, and/or sharing (Kim & Ko, 2012; Yadav & Rahman, 2017). It is one of the defining characteristics of SM technologies, giving greater access to information and supporting increased user control of and engagement with content. Interaction between businesses and their customers allows for user-generated content (UGC) on the business and its products. UGC positively influences the business, resulting in increased sales and hence improved performance in financial terms (Kim & Johnson, 2016).

Kim and Ko (2012) argue that, unlike watching TV or listening to the radio, SM interactivity allows consumers to be more than just passive recipients of stimulation. User interactivity enables consumers to participate on SM platforms by selecting the content, timing, and communication act participation from all parties, including individual users, groups of networked people or communities, and brands (Yadav & Rahman, 2017).

### ***Trendiness***

Trendiness refers to the ability of a business or brand to provide the most updated information about its products and services on SM (Godey et al., 2016). Firms can share information in real-time through SM, making it a source of the most recent information on product offerings, features, and attributes, as well as promotions and availability. Naaman et al. (2011) found that most customers relied on SM for the most up-to-date product information.

In addition, Lestari et al. (2024) found that the credibility of SMMA is more reliable from the consumer point of view than paid traditional marketing channels, such as television and newspaper advertisements. In this study, the four categories of trendiness – surveillance, pre-purchase information, knowledge, and inspiration were employed to measure the perceived trendiness of the SM pages of an SME. It is important to find out how the trendiness of an SM page can provide sufficient information to users and customers to make their purchase decisions, which improves firm performance.

## **Customisation**

Customisation refers to audience-specific content to fit the customers' needs (Kim & Ko, 2012). It is a crucial element of the SMMA to be successful and effective (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Through content customisation, a firm can communicate the unique selling point of its products and selling proposition (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Eze et al., 2021). Moreover, SM websites are classified as profile-based SM platforms that can offer businesses the ability to target specific audiences or people (Tarabieh, 2022). In this study, customisation is measured through the perceived customised information offered by the business.

## **Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM)**

e-WOM is defined by Barreto (2015) as informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organisation, or a service. Kim and Ko (2012) posit that the e-WOM represents all those business-related actions undertaken by a consumer to meet users sharing the same interest, in sharing information, feedback, and knowledge about a product. e-WOM is a strong marketing tool that a company can use since customers rely more on information provided by other customers about the business's products before making the purchase decision. e-WOM is different from traditional WOM, with the two complementing each other Barreto (2014).

e-WOM is derived from the traditional concept of word of mouth, which is the transmission of information concerning a brand from one person to another, both of whom are not the official, designated advertising or marketing channel of the product or company (Tarabieh, 2022). Hence, the information-seeking users identified in trendiness will be looking out for such kind of communication from users who can vouch for the efficacy of the company's products.

## **EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW**

The role of SMM on firm performance (generally, and on SMEs in particular) is well studied. Godey et al. (2016) assert that SM is altering the marketing landscape by allowing SMEs to advertise their products on several SM platforms. Barreto (2014) argues that SMEs that employ SM marketing can achieve a cost advantage over traditional advertising and marketing processes. Yang et al. (2017) argue that marketers can use SM data for three common functions in their marketing efforts, as well as to improve firm performance. These are opinion mining, targeted advertising, and customer

relations. Marketers engage in opinion mining, leveraging SM data to uncover knowledge, insights, and patterns derived from structured and unstructured data. Opinion mining may also involve tracking mentions or particular phrases (Tarabieh, 2022).

The use of SM in marketing has contributed to the individualisation of marketing as organisations can communicate, collect data, and provide personalised responses and solutions for customers (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). SMEs can use SM to craft personalised messages and offers for target audiences. Personalised offers may deliver five to eight times the return on investment (ROI) on marketing expenditure and can increase sales by more than 10% (Qalati et al., 2022; Yadav & Rahman, 2017).

The main objective of any marketing programme is to develop strong relationships with customers (Sano, 2014). Customer relations are improved using SM, which is used to attract, engage, and retain customers with UGC, using online two-way social interactions, and building relationships with other members (Kim & Ko, 2012). A key part of effective customer relationship management is to provide relevant, up-to-date information timeously and create a personal connection with the customer (Lestari et al., 2024).

SMM also improves customer relationships through activities on the SME's SM platforms, like posting messages such as customer endorsements, promotion information, and business activities that trigger a consumer engagement process via sharing, commenting, and liking (Keasey et al., 2025). These activities are classified under the trendiness and interactivity, which are the SMMA identified by Kim and Ko (2012). A longitudinal study by Ismail (2017) found that celebrity endorsement of SM influences purchase intention via the brand image and is moderated by brand differentiation.

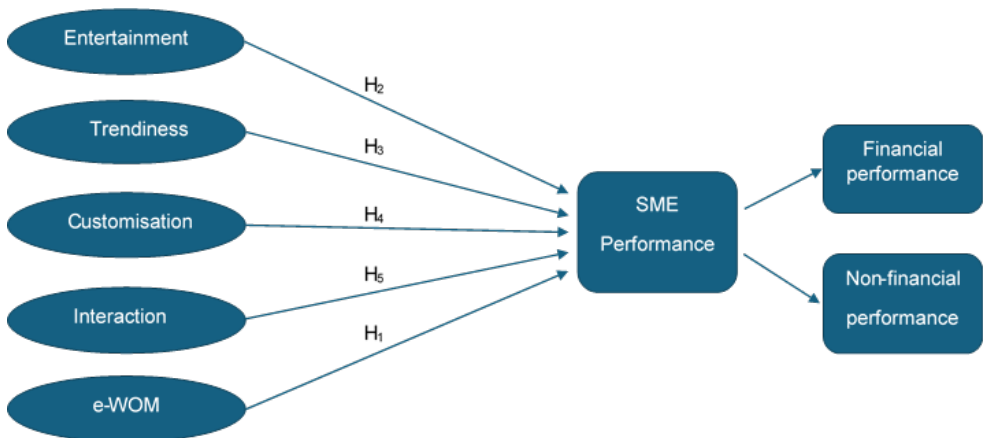
The use of SM marketing is more pronounced in B2C than in B2B organisations (Chang et al., 2015). Marketing of products on SM platforms enhances their visibility, which in turn drives sales. This has the potential to improve sales and therefore the performance of the company as well as brand visibility, which is a measure of non-financial performance. Marketing performance can be measured by sales performance (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021; Takit & Setiawan, 2025) and brand performance (Kotler et al., 2025). Previous research results showed that SMM has a positive and significant effect on brand image and brand awareness (Seo & Park, 2018). However, negative comments can harm a product or brand (Yadav & Rahman, 2017).

The dynamics of social media that facilitate two-way communication between businesses and consumers significantly influence consumer behaviour. This impact is generally greater than that of traditional one-way communication (Seo

& Park, 2018). A study by Kim and Ko (2012) indicated that social media marketing (SMM) activities positively affect brand equity in luxury brands. This was further supported by Godey et al. (2016), who found that SMM activities significantly impact brand equity, particularly brand awareness. Seo and Park (2018) examined social media marketing activities (SMMA) in the airline industry and discovered that SMMA positively affects brand awareness, a non-financial performance metric. Consequently, Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) concluded that SMM activities have a substantial expected effect on the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

### Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

Figure 1 below illustrates the proposed conceptual model of this study. The dependent variable in the study is SME performance. SME performance is conceptualised as both financial and non-financial performance. Financial performance is measured using the profitability measures of return on asset (ROA). Non-financial measures were given as brand loyalty and brand awareness. SMM activities are the independent variables of the study. The constructs of SMM were adopted from Kim and Ko (2012). These were identified as entertainment, trendiness, customisation, interaction and e-WOM.



**Figure 1:** Proposed conceptual framework (Source: Authors' conceptualisation)

### The effect of e-WOM on SME performance

Most SM platforms serve as excellent venues for e-WOM activities because of their dynamic characteristics and diverse communication options. Kim and Johnson (2016) discovered that the expansion of SMN and their capacity to

facilitate interpersonal communication among consumers enhanced the value of e-WOM. Additionally, marketers who utilised e-WOM as a marketing strategy achieved more successful campaigns compared to others. e-WOM is typically driven by three motivations: social, functional, and emotional (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010). Social motivation represents the need of customers to give opinions about products based on their experience as social beings (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). In respect of a business and its product proposition or service delivery, customers tend to want to express their joy and satisfaction (and disappointments, if dissatisfied) when using a company's products. Through e-WOM, customers praise the products, give suggestions to improve product quality and so on. This improves product visibility and hence the financial performance of the firm.

Functional motivation refers to the inclination to seek information about products (Lestari et al., 2024; Tarabieh, 2022). Customers visit a firm's SM platforms to seek information on products on offer, product use and attributes. They rely on previous users' testimonials of the products on how best to use them and their experience to gauge the user-friendliness of the products. Thus, prospective customers rely on previous users' e-WOM to make their purchase decisions. If prospective customers receive positive e-WOM, they will purchase from the firm, and this will improve the performance of the firm.

Emotional motivation symbolises the urge to express emotions about a product or experience. Fu et al. (2024) argue that customers participate in e-WOM because of psychological and/or social benefits. e-WOM may have implications for the provider, including the possibility of giving unsuitable advice (Tarabieh, 2022). This may negatively affect firm performance if, for example, customers send e-WOM to friends about a sale that has expired. In this case, prospective clients may not want to buy from the firm, thereby impairing its brand (Takit & Setiawan, 2025).

Berger (2014) contends that the motivations for sharing opinions fall into five categories that a provider aims to achieve: persuasion, information acquisition, impression management, social bonding, and emotion regulation. Persuasion appears in sales or interpersonal relationships, for example, when a customer speaks positively to a friend about a product to convince them to try it (Hanaysha, 2022). Thus, a satisfied customer can convince their friend to buy from the SME. Persuasion potentially improves firm performance through increased human traffic to the SM platforms (Chatterjee et al., 2022; ) (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Keasey et al., 2025).

Information acquisition takes place when a customer looks for information or advice about a product from knowledgeable peers (Kim & Ko, 2012; Tarabieh, 2022). Customers share their opinions about a product and their user

experience on SM platforms for others to benefit from their experience (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). If the experience is good, that improves the firm's performance; if it is unpleasant and unsatisfactory, that negatively affects the firm's performance.

Yang et al. (2017) argue that impression management is when consumers engage in e-WOM activities to form a good impression of themselves, including self-enhancement or communicating their personality characteristics, thereby impressing other consumers of the product by sharing their opinion on the product user experience. Thus, other consumers may also make a buying decision. This increases sales and, ultimately, the firm's financial performance. It also increases brand awareness and product visibility (Tarabieh, 2022).

H<sub>1</sub>: Positive e-WOM has a statistically significant effect on SME performance.

### **Influence of entertainment as an SMM platform on SME performance**

Users seek amusement and pleasure on the firm's SM sites to inform their purchase decisions on those websites (Seo & Park, 2018). When consumers find a firm's website pleasurable, they will likely buy from it. Once a sale is made, it increases overall sales, thereby improving financial performance. On the other hand, the non-financial performance of the firm is improved due to brand visibility and recognition, and customers will use e-WOM with their peers, colleagues, and acquaintances, thereby advertising on behalf of the company.

Muntinga et al. (2011) found that entertainment is a key motivator for customers to engage in online brand-related activities. Touchette et al. (2015) also found that the types of branded entertainment posts on Facebook, in order of popularity, were advertisements/photos, online interactivity, sweepstakes, audio/video, contests, events/festivals, and downloads/uploads. Since adverts were found to be the most popular entertainment posts, a firm can use its SM channels to advertise its products and services entertainingly to attract more customers to the brand (Tarabieh, 2022).

H<sub>2</sub>: Entertaining social media posts have a statistically significant effect on SME performance.

### **Effect of SMM platform trendiness on SME performance**

Customers looking for trendy information on SM are classified into four categories, namely surveillance, pre-purchase information, knowledge, and inspiration (Muntinga et al., 2011). These four categories determine the extent to which customers perceive the trendiness of an SM site and the action that the customer will take. Surveillance describes customers who look for updates

about a certain brand from its official SM pages (Muntinga et al., 2011; Orji et al., 2022). They visit several SM platforms searching for the most relevant and up-to-date information on brands and businesses of interest. They use the information to appreciate the product offering, the latest news and any other current information or events of the company or brand they follow. If a company is trending for the right reasons, the customers buy from it; if it is trending for the wrong reasons, like poor product quality, then customers shun the brand and business, thereby affecting its performance (Qalati et al., 2022).

Pre-purchase information category refers to customers who seek information to make a purchase decision (Eze et al., 2021; Muntinga et al., 2011). They look for goods and services and firms from which to buy online. As they visit the websites, they intend to get as much information as they can, then use it in their buy-decision – buy what, from whom, in what quantities and when (Orji et al., 2022).

The knowledge category denotes customers who seek information to gain experience about the product type based on comments from previous users on their user experience (Muntinga et al., 2011). They get convinced to make a buy decision if there is ample e-WOM on the product. They also depend on the information provided by the company. A good customer experience from previous users increases sales. The inspiration category relates to customers mainly concerned with gaining new information and ideas about what is trending in a specific industry or line of business (Fu et al., 2024; Muntinga et al., 2011). They are inspired by others on how to use a particular product in a different, innovative way.

H<sub>3</sub>: Trendiness of social media posts have a statistically significant effect on SME performance.

### **Influence of customisation on SME performance**

Customisation is crucial for successful and effective SMMA (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Through content customisation, a firm can communicate its selling proposition and the unique selling point of its products (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021; Takit & Setiawan, 2025). Moreover, profile-based SM websites can help businesses target specific audiences. Hence, the SM site can be customised to appeal to a particular market segment.

H<sub>4</sub>: Customisation of social media posts has a statistically significant effect on SME performance.

## Effect of interactivity of SMM platforms on SME performance

Previous research has indicated that the design and implementation of social media platforms recognise successful human-technology interaction as a crucial element (Kim & Ko, 2012). Interactivity is particularly significant as it influences users' responses to new technologies, including websites. Most SM platforms are considered interactive media. They enable two-way communication rather than one-directional transmission of information to an audience. Interactivity allows the firm to get customer feedback, which is important in improving product quality and new product development.

H<sub>5</sub>: Interactive social media platforms have a statistically significant effect on SME performance.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

### Research design

A descriptive research survey was employed. The descriptive survey was selected for its effectiveness in gathering the necessary quantitative data, which was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. This type of survey is generally regarded as reliable and is relatively straightforward to explain and comprehend. The descriptive survey employed in the present study was a cross-sectional study. The survey employed in this study was a self-administered descriptive survey. Self-administered surveys are often used to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, consumers' opinions, and preferences (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

### Sample size and sampling procedure

The researchers were interested in all formally registered and licensed SMEs in three cities, namely Gweru, Masvingo and Mutare, in Zimbabwe. The total number of SMEs was not easily obtainable from the local authorities' database. To overcome this limitation, the researchers employed the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula based on an indeterminate or infinite population. For a 95% confidence interval, the sample size per Krejcie and Morgan (1970) is 384 respondents. Despite the challenge of estimating and mapping the entire population of this study, probability sampling was employed. A stratified random sampling technique was used by classifying the SMEs in the city into different strata, namely, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) retail, fashion retail, hardware retail, travel and tourism, construction, and manufacturing. From these strata, the researchers used disproportionate stratified sampling, given that the retail strata had more elements than the other strata. The

researchers published the survey online for one week. The online survey was also sent to individuals with a request to participate in the survey.

## Research instrument

The study employed a self-administered questionnaire to collect data from the respondents. The research instrument was designed by the researchers, with adaptations from the instrument by Kim and Ko (2012) and Yadav and Rahman (2017). The constructs that formed the survey were: SMM activities (entertainment, e-WOM, trendiness, interaction, and customisation), and SME financial and non-financial performance. The measurements were based on a 5-point Likert scale anchored from strongly disagree 1 to strongly agree 5.

## DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the influence of SMMA on the performance of SMEs in Zimbabwe. In this study, the dependent variable is the performance of SMEs, while the independent variables adopted from Kim and Ko (2012) are: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and e-WOM. The proposed regression model for this study is given below:

$$\text{SME performance} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Ent} + \beta_2 \text{Int} + \beta_3 \text{Cus} + \beta_4 \text{e-WOM} + \beta_5 \text{Tre} + \varepsilon_i$$

Where Ent – is entertainment.

Int – is interaction.

Cus – is customisation.

e-WOM – is electronic word of mouth.

Tre – is trendiness

$\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$  are the regression parameters of the model.

$\varepsilon_i$  – is the error term, that is, it measures all the other variables not considered in the model.

Primary data collected from respondents was reviewed for completeness to verify that all questionnaire questions were answered. The data from the field study were coded, prepared, and checked for errors using version 25 of the Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The same programme was also used to carry out the regression analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic analysis

Sample characteristics of the respondents include gender, age, sector, qualifications and social media platforms used by the SMEs. Details are given in Table 1:

**Table 1.**  
Demographic profile of study respondents

Characteristics	Range/Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	60%
	Female	40%
Age	20 – 29	10%
	30 – 39	45%
	40 – 49	25%
	50 – 59	15%
	60 and above	5%
Sector	Manufacturing	15%
	Retail and wholesale	35%
	Travel and tourism	10%
	Services	15%
	Agribusiness	10%
	Construction	15%
Social media platforms used - (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp)	At least 2 SM platforms	35%
	At least 3 SM platforms	25%
	At least 4 SM platforms	20%
	At least 5 SM platforms	10%
	All of the above platforms	10%
Age of SME	1 – 3 years	25%
	4 – 6 years	35%
	7 – 9 years	25%
	10 years and above	15%

N = 384

(Source: Survey data, 2024)

The demographic analysis showed that 60% of the respondents were male, and 40% of the respondents were female. The median age of the respondents was found to be the 30 – 39 years age range, which accounted for 45% of the respondents. The 40 – 49 years age range accounted for 25% of the respondents. Moreover, in respect of the sectors in which the SMEs operated, the retail and wholesale sector accounted for 35%, while construction, manufacturing and services sectors accounted for 15% respectively, while agribusiness and travel and tourism accounted for 10% respectively. The study found that 25% of the respondents had been in existence for 1 – 3 years and 7 – 9 years respectively, 35% of the respondents were in existence for 4 – 6 years (which was the median age of the SMEs surveyed), and 15% of the SMEs had been in existence for 10

and more years.

### Reliability analysis

The researchers conducted a reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha to check the internal consistency of the variables. The reliability coefficients for the independent variable and dependent variable constructs were computed using SPSS Version 25. Table 2 shows the Cronbach's Alpha for the five constructs of the independent variable of social media marketing activities. These are e-WOM, customisation, interaction, entertainment, and trendiness, which had the following scores: 0.91, 0.82, 0.72, 0.74 and 0.87, respectively.

**Table 2.**  
Reliability statistics (Independent variable)

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
e-WOM	0.91
Customisation	0.82
Interaction	0.72
Entertainment	0.74
Trendiness	0.87

(Source: Survey data, 2024)

The study's dependent variable was SME performance. SME performance was classified into financial performance and non-financial performance. Non-financial performance was proxied by brand awareness and brand loyalty, while the SME's financial performance was measured by the increase in sales or the reduction in expenses. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) for three constructs of the dependent variable, namely, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and financial performance, was also calculated at 0.81, 0.92, and 0.85, respectively, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
Reliability statistics (Dependent variable)

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Financial performance	0.85
Brand awareness	0.81
Brand loyalty	0.92

(Source: Survey data, 2024)

Saunders et al. (2023) postulate that an acceptable level of Cronbach's Alpha should be a reliability coefficient of 0.7 and above. Since all the scales for both the dependent and independent variables were 0.7 and above, it can be

concluded that the instrument was internally reliable.

### Correlation Analysis

The study performed a correlation analysis to prevent multicollinearity, which occurs when there is a strong correlation among two or more independent variables (Cooper and Schindler, 2014). In regression analysis, significant multicollinearity is crucial because it can alter the calculated regression coefficients, complicating the interpretation of results. It is recommended to remove any variables with a correlation greater than 0.7. Therefore, based on Table 4 indicating the correlations among the independent variables, it can be concluded that there is no collinearity present, as the highest correlation observed is 0.387 (between interactivity and trendiness). The results of the correlation analysis are shown in the table below:

**Table 4.**  
Correlation matrix

Variable	Enter	Inter	Trend	Custom	eWOM	Fin Perf	Non-fin perf
Enter	1						
Inter	.301**	1					
Trend	.128	.387**	1				
Custom	.386**	.313	.215*	1			
eWOM	.129**	.343**	.327**	.129**	1		
Fin. Perf	.111	.282**	.212**	.204	.066**	1	
Non-fin Perf	-.292**	.036	-.091**	.177*	.088	.371**	1

Note. Enter = Entertainment; Inter = Interaction; Trend = Trend Awareness; Custom = Customer Focus; eWOM = Electronic Word of Mouth; Fin. Perf = Financial Performance; Non-fin Perf = Non-financial Performance.\*p < .05 (2-tailed). \*\*p < .01 (2-tailed). (Source: Survey Data, 2024)

### Regression analysis

To test the hypotheses outlined in this study, the following regression equation was used:

$$Br = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Ent + \beta_2 Int + \beta_3 Cus + \beta_4 e\text{-WOM} + \beta_5 Tre + \varepsilon_i$$

### Influence of SMMA on SME performance (brand awareness)

The study results indicate a positive effect between interaction and brand awareness and visibility as constructs of SME’s non-financial performance. Thus, the hypothesis that the interactivity of the SMM platform affects

**Table 5.**

Regression analysis of SMMA on SME performance (brand awareness)

Variables	With Control Variables		Without Control Variables	
	Standardized Coefficients	Significance	Standardized Coefficients	Significance
Entertainment	.068	.527	.057	.330
Interactivity	.322	.005	.325	.003
Trendiness	-.009	.690	-.032	.675
Customisation	.319	.066	.175	.093
e-WOM	-.009	.490	-.006	.693

(Source: Survey data, 2024)

SME performance in the form of non-financial performance was statistically significant. This assertion is supported by Zhu and Chen (2015), who affirmed that a firm can robustly engage with its target market by providing SM content that is specifically suited to the target market's needs. Therefore, this can potentially increase the sales and hence improve the performance of the firm. The study findings were further validated by including the control variables, as shown in Table 5, where there is a P-value = 0,005 and  $\beta = 0.232$ .

The study further found that perceived entertainment, trendiness, customisation and e-WOM activities are insignificant as their P-values of 0.527, 0.690, 0.66 and 0.490, respectively, were greater than 0.05. Therefore, the four variables, namely entertainment, trendiness, customisation and e-WOM, do not impact the dependent variable – brand awareness and visibility. The results also show a positive correlation between all the other variables with the dependent, except for trendiness, which has a negative correlation.

### Influence of SMMA on the SME non-financial performance (brand visibility)

The study findings illustrate an effect between entertainment, customisation, and e-WOM activities and non-financial performance proxied by brand awareness and visibility. To further validate the results, the study included the control variables. As seen in Table 6, with entertainment P-value = 0.005 and  $\beta = 0.195$ , customisation P-value = 0.019 and  $\beta = 0.157$ , and e-WOM P-value = 0 and  $\beta = 0.249$ . Therefore, the hypothesis that entertainment, customisation, and e-WOM have statistically significant effects on the SME non-financial performance measured by brand visibility was accepted.

Thus, customers can put encouraging comments on their user experiences, generating e-WOM. Through social bonding, consumers participate in e-WOM

to seek acceptance, enhance relationships, and reaffirm shared views with their reference group (Kim & Ko, 2012). Consumers air their views of a product to gain acceptance in their social reference group, following the opinion of influencers. Thus, if the social influencers' opinions are against a particular brand or business, its performance is negatively affected.

Where the influencers have a positive opinion, the other social group members will also have a positive perception of the firm, and hence they will buy from the firm (Keasey et al., 2025; Lestari et al., 2024). In addition, the study findings confirm the Berger (2014) study who found that with emotion regulation, consumers rely on e-WOM to manage their emotions, especially when consumers express a bad buying experience. They want everyone to know how bad their experiences were. They want others not to experience the same bad experiences using the product (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Therefore, they de-campaign the product in the market by discouraging others from buying the product, hence affecting the performance of the firm and its products on the market.

Kim and Johnson (2016) suggest that user-generated content (UGC) enhances business outcomes by boosting sales and, in turn, strengthening financial performance. In line with this view, the present study confirms that engaging and entertaining content encourages customers to enjoy interacting with a firm's social media pages, which can motivate purchase decisions and ultimately raise sales. Additionally, online advertising helps lower overall promotional expenditures, thereby increasing profitability (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021; Takit & Setiawan, 2025). Consequently, the entertainment value of an SME's social media platforms can contribute to higher sales, reduced advertising costs, and improved non-financial performance through greater brand visibility and awareness.

Perceived interactivity and trendiness were statistically insignificant at 0.182 and 0.462, respectively, as the P-value > 0.05. Thus, these two constructs did not have a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable – brand awareness and visibility. Therefore, the hypotheses that interactivity and trendiness affect the non-financial performance of the SME, measured by brand awareness and visibility, were rejected.

### **SMMA effect on financial performance**

The hypothesis that SMM activities influence the financial performance of an SME was also tested using regression analysis. The study results indicate a positive effect of the interactivity of the brand's SM pages on the SME's financial performance as seen in Table 7, with P-value = 0.002 and  $\beta = 0.268$ . Thus,

**Table 6.**  
Regression analysis of SMMA and brand visibility

Variables	With control variables		Without control variables	
	Standardised Coefficients	Sig.	Standardised Coefficients	Sig.
Entertainment	.195	.005	.195	.006
Interactivity	.097	.182	.102	.154
Trendiness	.049	.462	.028	.675
Customisation	.157	.019	.181	.009
e-WOM	.249	.000	.249	.000

(Source: Survey data, 2024)

the hypothesis that interactivity positively affected financial performance was accepted.

The perceived entertainment, trendiness, customisation, and e-WOM activities were insignificant (0.210, 0.946, 0.260 and 0.869, respectively because the P-value > 0.05 and did not have a statistically significant impact on the dependent variable. Thus, the hypotheses that entertainment, trendiness, customisation and e-WOM affected financial performance were rejected.

**Table 7.**  
Regression analysis of SMMA on financial performance

Variables	With Control Variables		Without Control Variables	
	Standardised Coefficients	Sig.	Standardised Coefficients	Sig.
Interactivity	.268	.002	.247	.002
Entertainment	0.130	.210	0.180	.196
Trendiness	.003	.946	.320	.726
Customisation	.541	.260	.741	.505
e-WOM	.003	.869	.010	.698

(Source: Survey data, 2024)

Therefore, the company's SM platforms must provide detailed information on the products available to enable the consumer to expedite their purchase decision. Increased orders result in improved firm performance. Thus, if these customers are positively inspired, they buy and hence increase sales and firm performance.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study examined the influence of SMMA, proxied by interaction, entertainment, trendiness, customisation, and e-WOM as the independent variables, on SME performance measured by brand awareness, brand loyalty, and financial performance as the dependent variables. The study results show that SMMA was found to be significantly effective in the performance of SMEs. The results also indicate that SMMA undertaken by SMEs to profile and market their brands, goods, and services was found to positively impact brand awareness, brand visibility, and the financial performance of the SMEs. The study findings also revealed that interaction on SM has a positive effect on brand awareness and visibility of the SMEs by consumers. The hypothesis is that interaction positively influences brand awareness and visibility. Furthermore, the findings confirm that entertainment, e-WOM, and customisation of the SME's brands on SM positively influence SME performance through increased brand awareness and visibility as well as increased sales.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the study, it is recommended that SME owners/managers incorporate social media marketing activities into their marketing strategy since it was found that social media was an effective tool for achieving improved SME financial and non-financial performance. The study further recommends SME owners/managers to use particular types of SMMA, keeping in mind the desired marketing objectives to be achieved. Accordingly, incorporating trendiness and e-WOM activities can achieve a high level of improved sales that can lead to improved performance by the SME. The interactivity of the firm's SM platforms is highly recommended since interactivity stimulates customer interaction with the SME's SM platforms to achieve high-level brand awareness. For example, managers can use interactive activities to raise awareness about a new product being launched or new stocks that have arrived to enhance sales in the short run. In the same vein, SME owners/managers should utilise the SMMA that enhances the e-WOM, where the objective is to acquire new customers via referrals.

While social media marketing activities (SMMA) have become increasingly adopted by SMEs, existing research remains limited in the emerging markets context, particularly regarding their direct influence on firm performance. Most studies focus on large corporations or developed markets, with scant empirical evidence examining how specific SMMA dimensions, such as interactivity, entertainment, trendiness, e-WOM and customisation, affect customer engagement, sales, and brand equity in SMEs. Moreover, prior research often employs cross-sectional designs, self-reported data, or general marketing frameworks, over-

looking the unique challenges SMEs face, including resource constraints, limited digital literacy, and sectoral heterogeneity. Consequently, there is a clear need for context-specific, empirical investigation that links SMMA implementation to measurable SME performance outcomes, providing actionable insights for managers and contributing to theory development in digital marketing for resource-constrained business environments.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

## FUNDING

This study did not receive any funding.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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