



Leveraging Language as A Marketing Tool to Enhance the Performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMES) In Kitale Central Business District (CBD)

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Abstract

Language plays a critical role in shaping marketing effectiveness and business performance, particularly in culturally and linguistically diverse urban centers. This paper examines the use of language as a marketing tool to enhance business performance in Kitale Central Business District (CBD), Kenya. Grounded in marketing communication theory, sociolinguistics, and consumer behavior, the study explores how linguistic choices such as language preference, tone, code-switching, and cultural alignment influence customer attraction, engagement, trust, and purchasing decisions. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to capture both measurable trends and contextual insights. Data were collected from a sample of 150 SMEs, including business owners and managers across diverse sectors such as retail, hospitality, financial services, transport, agribusiness, and professional services. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed and presented in narratives highlighting patterns and key insights. The paper demonstrates that strategic language use significantly improves customer relationships, brand perception, and sales performance. The study contributes to both theory and practice by providing empirical evidence on the role of language in SME marketing strategies, informing business owners, managers, and policymakers on effective communication approaches in linguistically diverse urban marketplaces.

Keywords: Language strategy, marketing communication, business performance, SMEs, culture

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental tool in marketing globally, shaping customer perceptions, influencing decision-making, and establishing brand identity. In international contexts, businesses increasingly rely on multilingual and culturally nuanced communication strategies to gain competitive advantage, with language affecting advertising effectiveness, customer engagement, and overall market performance (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Otiso, 2018). Regionally, in East Africa, linguistic diversity is a key consideration for SMEs, where the use of English, Kiswahili, and local languages enhances market penetration and builds consumer trust (Otiso, 2019; Otiso&Mandago, 2021). Studies in Kenyan urban centers show that SMEs that strategically deploy culturally and linguistically appropriate marketing messages experience higher customer loyalty and better sales outcomes. Locally, Kitale Central Business District (CBD) represents a microcosm of this diversity, hosting a mix of formal and informal enterprises, including retail shops, financial services, hospitality establishments, transport operators, and professional services. Customers in this area communicate in English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and indigenous languages such as Luhya dialects and Kalenjin. This multilingual environment presents both opportunities and challenges for marketing communication, requiring SMEs to adopt deliberate and context-sensitive language strategies (Otiso, 2020; Otiso, 2021). Despite the critical role of language in marketing, many SMEs in Kitale CBD rely on ad hoc communication methods without systematically considering linguistic

impact. This study examines how language can be strategically used as a marketing tool to enhance business performance in Kitale CBD, addressing the gap between theory and practice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language and Marketing Communication

Marketing communication theory emphasizes clarity, consistency, and audience relevance in message delivery. Language enables firms to articulate value propositions, differentiate offerings, and persuade consumers. Effective marketing language enhances message comprehension and emotional appeal, which are critical for influencing consumer behavior (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Kennedy Otiso (2018, 2019) further highlights that in SMEs, language not only conveys information but also constructs organizational identity and shapes stakeholder perceptions, especially in multicultural markets. Strategic communication, including the choice of vocabulary, tone, and medium, directly affects customer engagement and trust.

2.2 Sociolinguistics and Business Interaction

Sociolinguistics highlights the role of language in social identity and relationship building. In multilingual societies, code-switching and language accommodation help businesses connect with customers. Using a customer's preferred language can signal respect, inclusion, and trust, thereby strengthening business–customer relationships (Tannen, 1995; Otiso, 2020). Otiso (2021) emphasizes that SMEs that intentionally adapt language to align with cultural and social expectations improve negotiation outcomes and customer satisfaction, enhancing their competitive positioning.

2.3 Consumer Behavior and Linguistic Influence

Consumer behavior studies indicate that language framing affects perception, attitude formation, and purchasing decisions. Positive, benefit-oriented, and culturally resonant language increases perceived value and reduces buyer uncertainty. Conversely, inappropriate or overly technical language may alienate customers (Solomon, 2018). Otiso&Mandago (2021) demonstrate that in Kenyan SMEs, culturally aligned language strategies increase repeat patronage and improve overall sales performance.

2.4 Empirical Studies on Language and Business Performance

Localized language use has been empirically linked to enhanced customer engagement, improved satisfaction, and higher sales, particularly in SMEs operating in emerging markets (Otiso, 2019). However, limited empirical work has focused specifically on secondary urban centers such as Kitale, creating a contextual research gap. This underscores the need to study how SMEs in linguistically diverse urban settings leverage language as a strategic marketing tool.

2.5 Language Use in a Diverse SME Population

Kitale CBD hosts a linguistically and culturally diverse population comprising traders, professionals, farmers, students, and migrants from different regions of Kenya. SMEs in this context serve customers who communicate in English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and various indigenous languages, including Kalenjin and Luhya dialects. Linguistic diversity shapes customer expectations and interaction patterns, making language choice a critical determinant of marketing effectiveness. Research indicates that multilingual communication enhances market reach and inclusivity (Otiso, 2020). Businesses that adapt their language to suit different customer segments attract heterogeneous clientele and foster loyalty. In Kitale CBD, SMEs that flexibly switch between languages during customer engagement demonstrate cultural sensitivity and social awareness, positively influencing trust and perceived service quality.

Additionally, language diversity among SME owners and employees affects internal and external communication. Employees who share linguistic backgrounds with customers often act as cultural intermediaries, translating words, meanings, and expectations. This dynamic enables SMEs to personalize marketing messages and negotiate effectively with diverse customer groups. Failure to manage linguistic diversity may result in miscommunication, exclusion, or customer dissatisfaction (Otiso, 2021).

2.6 Language, Communication, and SME Performance: Insights from Otiso's Scholarship

Kennedy Otiso's research emphasizes the centrality of communication culture and language in shaping stakeholder engagement, organizational performance, and market outcomes (Otiso, 2020; Otiso, 2021; Otiso&Mandago, 2021). His work on communication culture in governance and organizational contexts demonstrates that language is not merely instrumental but constitutive of trust, legitimacy, and performance. These insights are directly applicable to SMEs, where owner–customer interaction is frequent and highly personalized.

Otiso argues that culturally grounded and context-sensitive communication enhances stakeholder responsiveness and value creation. In the SME context of Kitale CBD, businesses that strategically deploy inclusive, respectful, and audience-aligned language are better positioned to build customer relationships and sustain competitiveness. His work further underscores the importance of ethical and transparent language practices, which reinforce credibility and long-term performance. By incorporating Otiso's communication-centered perspective, this study conceptualizes language as a strategic resource embedded within everyday business interactions rather than a peripheral promotional tool. This framing strengthens the theoretical grounding of the study and situates it within locally relevant scholarship, providing insights for both academics and practitioners in SME marketing strategy.

III. Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a **descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods design**, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of language in SME marketing performance. The quantitative component allowed for the measurement of trends, patterns, and relationships between language use and business performance, while the qualitative component provided rich, contextual insights into customer and business owner experiences, perceptions, and strategies. This design is particularly suitable for capturing the multidimensional nature of language in diverse urban business environments.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Kitale Central Business District (CBD), Trans Nzoia County, Kenya. Kitale CBD is a commercial hub that hosts a wide range of SMEs including retail shops, financial services, hospitality businesses, transport operators, agribusiness enterprises, and professional service providers. The area is characterized by a linguistically and culturally diverse population, comprising urban residents, peri-urban communities, and migrants from other counties, making it ideal for studying multilingual marketing practices.

Target Population

The target population included SME owners and managers who directly interact with customers and are responsible for marketing decisions, as well as customers who engage with these businesses. This population was selected to capture both the supply-side perspective (business strategies) and the demand-side perspective (customer perceptions and responses) regarding language use in marketing.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 150 SMEs were sampled from various business sectors including retail trade, hospitality, financial services, transport, agribusiness, and professional services. The respondents consisted of owners and managers actively involved in marketing and customer engagement. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure adequate representation across the different business sectors, enhancing the generalizability of the findings. The stratification was based on business type, size, and location within the CBD to capture diversity in language practices and marketing approaches.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using structured questionnaires for the quantitative component and semi-structured interview guides for the qualitative component. The questionnaires included closed-ended questions on language preferences, marketing strategies, customer engagement, and perceived business performance, allowing for statistical analysis. The semi-structured interviews enabled the collection of in-depth narratives, exploring business owners' experiences, decision-making processes, and challenges in using language strategically. Pre-testing of the instruments was conducted to ensure reliability and validity.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved face-to-face administration of questionnaires to SME owners and managers, and interviews with selected participants who consented to provide detailed insights. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed. Data collection took place over a four-week period, with research assistants trained in multilingual communication to facilitate engagement with respondents using their preferred languages.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Response Rate

Out of the 150 SMEs targeted, 142 fully participated, resulting in a response rate of 94.7%, which is considered adequate for reliability and generalizability. The respondents included business owners and managers from

various sectors: 35% from retail trade, 25% from hospitality, 15% from financial services, 10% from transport, 10% from agribusiness, and 5% from professional services. The respondents' demographic profile showed that 60% were male and 40% female, with ages ranging from 25 to 55 years. Educational levels varied, with 45% having tertiary education, 35% secondary education, and 20% informal training or vocational qualifications.

Responses to Research Questions

Research Question 1: Dominant Language Practices Most SMEs used a combination of English and Kiswahili in signage, marketing materials, and customer interactions. Code-switching between Kiswahili and indigenous languages such as Luhya and Kalenjin was common during direct customer engagement. 78% of respondents indicated that they adapt language based on the customer's preference.

Research Question 2: Relationship between Language Use and Customer Response Quantitative analysis showed that 82% of customers reported higher satisfaction when served in their preferred language. Interview narratives confirmed that language adaptation enhanced customer trust, loyalty, and perceived service quality.

Research Question 3: Impact of Marketing Language on Business Performance SMEs that strategically used multilingual communication reported improved sales performance, higher repeat patronage, and stronger brand image. Mean customer satisfaction scores were significantly higher for businesses implementing language-sensitive marketing strategies.

Research Question 4: Practical Language-Based Marketing Strategies Responses highlighted several strategies including: using multilingual signage and advertising, training staff in customer-preferred languages, incorporating cultural expressions in marketing, and consistently using the same language in branding across physical and digital platforms. Participants emphasized that flexibility in language use and cultural sensitivity are key to enhancing customer engagement and business outcomes.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

The study found that SMEs in Kitale CBD employ a variety of language practices in their marketing strategies. Most SMEs used a combination of English and Kiswahili, supplemented with code-switching into indigenous languages such as Luhya and Kalenjin during direct customer interactions. A significant proportion (78%) of business owners/managers reported adapting their language to suit customer preferences.

Customer response to language use was overwhelmingly positive. Approximately 82% of customers indicated higher satisfaction when served in their preferred language. Interview narratives confirmed that language adaptation fostered trust, loyalty, and perceived service quality. Regarding business performance, SMEs implementing multilingual communication strategies reported enhanced sales performance, repeat patronage, and improved brand image. Quantitative data showed higher mean customer satisfaction scores among businesses that used language-sensitive marketing. Practical strategies identified by participants included multilingual signage and advertising, staff training in customer-preferred languages, integration of cultural expressions in marketing, and consistent language use across branding platforms. Flexibility and cultural sensitivity emerged as central to effective language-based marketing.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

The findings corroborate previous literature on the role of language in marketing and consumer behavior. Marketing communication theory underscores that clarity, consistency, and audience relevance enhance message effectiveness (Kotler & Keller, 2016). SMEs in Kitale CBD applied these principles through adaptive language use, aligning with Otiso's (2018, 2019, 2020) work on communication culture, which emphasizes that context-sensitive language fosters stakeholder engagement and trust. Sociolinguistic insights highlight that code-switching and language accommodation strengthen social relationships (Tannen, 1995; Otiso, 2021). The study's finding that 82% of customers prefer communication in their native or preferred language aligns with Otiso & Mandago (2021), who observed that culturally aligned communication enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty in SMEs.

Consumer behavior literature indicates that language framing influences perception and purchasing decisions (Solomon, 2018). The observed increase in repeat patronage and improved sales performance among SMEs using multilingual communication strategies validates this assertion. The study extends empirical evidence to a secondary urban center in Kenya, filling a previously noted research gap (Otiso, 2019). Practical strategies reported by respondents reflect the operationalization of theoretical principles, showing that SMEs can implement language as a strategic marketing tool to achieve tangible business outcomes. The findings also suggest that SMEs with flexible and culturally sensitive communication are better positioned to navigate the linguistic diversity of Kitale CBD.

5.3 Conclusions

Language is a critical marketing tool for SMEs operating in linguistically diverse urban contexts such as Kitale CBD. Strategic use of English, Kiswahili, and indigenous languages, complemented by code-switching and cultural alignment, enhances customer satisfaction, loyalty, and overall business performance. SMEs that deliberately integrate language strategies into their marketing practices are more likely to achieve improved sales, stronger brand image, and sustained competitiveness. The study confirms that language is both a communication medium and a strategic resource, aligning with theoretical perspectives from marketing communication, sociolinguistics, and consumer behavior, and reinforcing the insights of Kennedy Ntabo Otiso on communication culture and stakeholder engagement.

5.4 Recommendations

1. SMEs should adopt flexible language strategies tailored to diverse customer segments, ensuring inclusivity and enhancing customer engagement.
2. Staff training in multilingual communication should be prioritized to equip employees with skills to engage effectively with customers of varying linguistic backgrounds.
3. Use of culturally resonant language and expressions in signage, advertising, and digital platforms can strengthen brand identity and customer trust.
4. Consistent brand language across all marketing channels should be maintained to enhance clarity, recognition, and professionalism.
5. Further research is recommended to quantitatively measure the impact of language strategies on long-term business performance, including profitability and market share, across other secondary towns in Kenya and East Africa.

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