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Assessing How Participation in Trade Fairs Enhances Brand Awareness for Small and Medium Enterprises in Lagos: A Case Study of the Lagos International Trade Fair

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses how participation in trade fairs enhances brand awareness for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) at the Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF), with particular focus on the 2025 edition held at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS), Lagos. Trade fairs provide strategic platforms for branding, product promotion, and relationship building; however, the extent to which participation contributes to SME brand awareness in emerging economies remains underexplored in marketing research. Adopting a qualitative research approach, this study combines on-site observations and semi-structured interviews with selected SME exhibitors at major trade fair organized in Lagos. The research examines how participation variables such as booth presentation, product demonstration, promotional materials, and interpersonal selling influence brand recognition, recall, and visitor perception. The Lagos trade fair environment, which attracts thousands of exhibitors and visitors annually across diverse sectors, offers a dynamic setting in which repeated exposure and direct interaction shape branding outcomes. Key participation attributes, including booth visibility, staff engagement, and experiential communication, were assessed for their contribution to enhancing SME brand prominence and memorability. Findings indicate that active participation in trade fairs significantly improves brand awareness by increasing direct exposure, facilitating meaningful customer interactions, and strengthening perceived brand credibility. Well-designed displays and interactive demonstrations were found to exert the strongest influence on visitor recall and recognition of SME brands. The study demonstrates that trade fairs function not only as sales and networking platforms but also as powerful branding environments that support SME market positioning in competitive urban contexts. By highlighting the branding value of trade fair participation, the research contributes to experiential marketing and SME branding literature within an emerging economy setting. Practically, the findings provide guidance for SME owners, marketing managers, and exhibition organizers on how to design participation strategies that optimize brand awareness and long-term competitiveness in Lagos.

Keywords: Brand awareness, Exhibition marketing, Experiential marketing, Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), Trade fair participation.

INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in economic growth, job creation, and innovation globally (Muchori & Reid, 2025; Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022). In Nigeria, SMEs constitute a significant portion of the private sector and are critical contributors to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), yet many struggle to achieve sustainable competitive advantage and broad market visibility (Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022; Adeniran & Johnston, 2021).

One strategic opportunity for enhancing visibility and customer awareness is participation in trade fairs. These are organized gatherings where producers, buyers, and stakeholders converge to display and exchange market information (Mazikana, Hove, & Mabenge, 2024; Sun, 2025). These events provide an interactive platform for businesses to increase exposure, develop networks, and communicate brand features directly to target audiences (Mazikana et al., 2024). Through exhibitions, product demonstrations,

and interpersonal engagement, trade fairs provide SMEs with opportunities to build brand awareness, strengthen brand recall, and establish credibility in highly competitive markets (Kotler & Keller, 2022).

In Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital and one of Africa's largest business hubs, trade fairs play a crucial role in supporting enterprise development, innovation diffusion, and market access. Major exhibitions, such as the Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF), attract thousands of exhibitors and visitors annually, offering SMEs an avenue to showcase products, communicate brand identity, and expand market reach (Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry [LCCI], 2023). The LITF, organized by the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), is the largest trade exhibition in West Africa and draws diverse participants across sectors annually at Tafawa Balewa Square, Lagos (Wikipedia, 2026). This environment creates a practical setting to understand the strategic role of trade fairs in SME brand development.

Trade fairs and exhibitions have been found to facilitate market performance, including improvements in network development, product exposure, and information exchange (Mazikana et al., 2024; Sun, 2025). Brand awareness refers to the extent to which consumers can recognize or recall a brand under different conditions and is a critical precursor to purchase intention, loyalty, and long-term competitiveness (Muchori & Reid, 2025).

Despite their potential and empirical studies on how trade fair participation enhances brand awareness among SMEs in Lagos, there remains a gap. This gap in research creates a need to explore the extent to which trade fairs influence SME brand visibility, recognition, and customer recall. This study adopts a marketing and business communication perspective to investigate how participation in trade fairs enhances brand awareness among SMEs in Lagos. Using interviews and on-site observations of selected SMEs during trade fairs, the study explores how exhibitor participation, booth presentation, interpersonal selling, and promotional activities influence brand recognition, recall, and perception among visitors.

By positioning trade fairs as strategic branding environments, this research examines how experiential interactions contribute to SME brand development within the Lagos business ecosystem. Specifically, the study focuses on evaluating how participation in trade fairs influences brand awareness for SMEs in Lagos, using selected trade fairs organized by the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) as case contexts.

The scope focuses on SMEs that participated in the Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF), at Tafawa Balewa Square, Onikan, Lagos Island, Lagos State. Participants across manufacturing, services, and creative sectors were surveyed to understand their experiences, marketing practices, and perceptions of brand visibility outcomes from the trade fair. The research will analyze data from the most recent 2025 LITF edition to ensure relevance to current SME marketing environments.

The problem of this study is that despite the recognized importance of marketing platforms for SMEs, many local enterprises in Lagos continue to face limited brand visibility, intense competition, and insufficient marketing knowledge, which constrain their effective utilization of trade fair platforms (Muchori & Reid, 2025; Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022). Although prior studies have examined the impact of trade fairs on overall marketing performance, there remains a lack of empirical research specifically assessing how participation in trade fairs enhances brand awareness among SMEs in Lagos. This gap in evidence limits SME owners, trade fair organizers, and policymakers from making informed decisions regarding marketing strategy, resource allocation, and investment in trade fair participation (Mazikana, Hove, & Mabenge, 2024).

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to assess how participation in trade fairs enhances brand awareness for SMEs in Lagos, using the Lagos International Trade Fair as a case study. The study objectives are:

- i. To assess the influence of trade fair participation on the brand visibility of SMEs.
- ii. To evaluate how trade fair participation affects customer recognition and recall of SME brands.
- iii. To identify the challenges SMEs encounter in maximizing brand awareness through trade fair participation.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- i. How does participation in trade fairs influence the brand visibility of SMEs in Lagos?
- ii. To what extent does participation in trade fairs affect customer recognition and recall of SME brands?
- iii. What challenges do SMEs encounter in maximizing brand awareness through trade fair participation?

This study is significant because this research contributes to academic literature by providing empirical insights into the relationship between trade fair participation and brand awareness outcomes in a developing economy context, addressing gaps in SME marketing research where branding and market visibility have been shown to influence firm performance (Muchori & Reid, 2025; Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022). It also offers practical insights for SME owners, trade fair organizers, and policymakers on how trade fair engagement influences brand visibility and recognition, particularly in contexts similar to Lagos where SMEs face resource constraints in traditional advertising and are increasingly leveraging participatory marketing platforms (Muchori & Reid, 2025). The findings will be useful for strategic planning, marketing resource allocation, and the development of tailored support programmes for SMEs aiming to leverage trade fairs as a branding tool, especially since exhibitions and events have been empirically linked to enhanced brand visibility and market interaction (Mazikana, Hove, & Mabenge, 2024). In addition, stakeholders such as the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) and the Lagos State Ministry of Commerce may apply these insights to enhance trade fair design and support services for participating SMEs, strengthening pathways for sustainable competitive advantage and customer engagement (Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022; Muchori & Reid, 2025).

This study is justified because Trade fairs and exhibitions provide dynamic and interactive platforms for businesses to communicate directly with customers and industry stakeholders, allowing firms to showcase products, demonstrate value propositions, and engage potential buyers in real time (Sun, 2025). Empirical evidence from recent studies suggests that exhibitions can significantly enhance brand visibility and strengthen brand value by placing firms in environments where direct interaction with customers increases recognition and recall (Mazikana, Hove, & Mabenge, 2024; Sun, 2025). In addition, research on marketing and SME performance demonstrates that increased brand awareness is closely associated with improved competitive positioning, customer acquisition, and long-term business sustainability for small and medium enterprises (Muchori & Reid, 2025).

For SMEs, especially those operating in resource-constrained markets like Lagos, trade fair participation represents a cost-effective marketing channel that complements digital and traditional advertising, enabling firms to gain visibility without relying solely on high-cost promotional campaigns (Sun, 2025). Moreover, in contexts where SMEs struggle to establish strong brand recognition due to competitive market conditions, evidence shows that structured participation in trade fairs enables firms to disseminate information about products and build network relationships that extend beyond the event itself (Mazikana et al., 2024; Sun, 2025). Therefore, investigating how trade fair participation enhances brand awareness is justified both theoretically and practically, as it fills an empirical gap in SME branding research while providing actionable insights for business owners, policymakers, and trade fair organizers seeking to leverage trade fairs to foster SME growth and competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are widely recognised in academic and policy domains for their contributions to economic growth, employment, and innovation (Muchori & Reid, 2025; Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022). In developing economies, which includes Nigeria, SMEs constitute a substantial share of the private sector and contribute significantly to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), yet continue to face challenges in accessing markets, financing, and strategic marketing resources (Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022; Adeniran & Johnston, 2021). Despite these constraints, SMEs' ability to compete effectively in dynamic market environments increasingly depends on their capacity to build and maintain brand awareness. This is a precursor to consumer choice and loyalty (Muchori & Reid, 2025).

The literature defines SMEs in varying ways but commonly agrees on characteristics such as scale of operations, employment levels, and revenue thresholds. While this study does not aim to redefine SMEs,

it recognizes that structural limitations in marketing and branding are persistent challenges that influence firm performance across contexts (Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022).

Trade fairs and exhibitions are specialized marketing platforms that bring together producers, buyers, intermediaries, and stakeholders in organized settings to exchange information, negotiate transactions, and enhance visibility (Mazikana, Hove, & Mabenge, 2024; Sun, 2025). As experiential events, fairs facilitate direct interaction between firms and potential customers, allowing businesses to demonstrate products, communicate brand value propositions, and gather market insights in real time.

Several studies emphasize the experiential advantages of trade fairs, noting that exhibitions provide SMEs with opportunities to foster interpersonal engagement, build networks, and enhance visibility beyond conventional advertising methods (Mazikana et al., 2024; Sun, 2025). These engagements can translate into stronger brand recall and recognition, especially where traditional promotional channels are limited by cost or reach (Sun, 2025).

Brand awareness refers to the extent to which consumers can recognize or recall a brand under varying conditions and contexts. It serves as a foundation for deeper brand equity elements, such as perceived quality and brand loyalty (Muchori & Reid, 2025). High brand awareness improves consumer decision-making, increases the likelihood of purchase, and enhances competitive positioning (Muchori & Reid, 2025).

Awareness building is crucial for SMEs that typically lack large advertising budgets but must compete with established brands for customer attention. Recent research highlights the positive role of interactive and experiential marketing, such as trade fair participation, in strengthening brand awareness, particularly where face-to-face marketing can generate trust and credibility (Mazikana et al., 2024; Sun, 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that participation in trade fairs has numerous benefits for enterprises, including improvements in market performance indicators such as network development, product exposure, and information exchange. All of these contribute to broader brand awareness (Mazikana et al., 2024; Sun, 2025). Trade fairs offer a competitive space for direct product demonstrations, immediate feedback, and interaction with industry peers, which enhances market intelligence and strategic positioning (Sun, 2025).

However, the literature also recognizes contextual variability in outcomes. For example, the ability of firms to capitalize on trade fair participation often depends on internal capacities, such as: marketing knowledge, strategic planning, and exhibit design. These are factors that SMEs may not uniformly possess (Mazikana et al., 2024). Thus, trade fair participation alone is not a guarantee of enhanced brand visibility unless accompanied by deliberate branding strategy and resource investment. In the Nigerian context, Lagos emerges as a central business hub where trade events play a significant role in market access and enterprise visibility (Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry [LCCI], 2023). Major exhibitions, particularly the Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF), attract thousands of exhibitors and visitors annually, offering SMEs opportunities to showcase products and engage with diverse market segments (LCCI, 2023; Wikipedia, 2026). Despite these activities, specific empirical research on how such platforms influence brand awareness outcomes for Nigerian SMEs, particularly in Lagos, remains sparse.

The existing literature on African trade fairs predominantly focuses on market participation and performance outcomes broadly, but not explicitly on brand awareness within a localized setting such as Lagos (Mazikana et al., 2024; Sun, 2025). This gap underscores the need for context-specific investigations that can inform SME marketing practice and policy interventions in Nigeria and similar markets. Although trade fairs present multiple opportunities, SMEs often encounter challenges that limit the full realization of brand benefits. Studies show that constraints such as limited financial resources, inadequate planning, and weak promotional strategies can undermine the potential of trade fairs as branding tools (Sun, 2025). Additionally, SMEs may lack the specialized marketing knowledge required to design and execute effective trade fair participation that maximizes customer engagement and post-event follow-up (Mazikana et al., 2024). These challenges emphasize that trade fair participation must be complemented by broader

organizational strategies, such as pre-event promotion, training in exhibition marketing, and integrated branding efforts. This should be done so as to deliver measurable improvements in brand visibility and consumer recall.

While the literature recognizes the strategic value of trade fairs and brand awareness, the specific mechanisms through which trade fair participation influences brand visibility and recall (especially for SMEs in Lagos) remain under-researched. Most existing studies are either generalized across regions or focused on larger firm contexts, leaving a gap in empirical evidence tied to developing-economy SMEs and major exhibitions like the LITF. This literature review thus highlights the need for focused research that investigates the experiential and strategic pathways linking trade fair participation to enhanced brand awareness, particularly within the Nigerian SME ecosystem.

Plate 1.0: Showing the exterior of the various exhibition halls for the enterprises.



Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025

Plate 2.0: Showing the interiors of the exhibition halls



Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025

Plate 3.0: Showing the spatial permeability influencing how people move through and use public environments



Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to examine how participation in trade fairs enhances brand awareness among small and medium enterprises (SMEs), focusing on exhibitors that participated in the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair held at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS), Lagos. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because trade fairs function as experiential marketing environments where direct interaction, observation, and communication shape branding outcomes. This design allowed for an in-depth exploration of exhibitors' experiences and perceptions within a real-life setting, making it suitable for assessing brand visibility, recognition, and recall associated with trade fair participation (Sun, 2025; Mazikana, Hove, & Mabenge, 2024). The Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF) was selected as the case context due to its prominence as a major exhibition platform for SMEs in Nigeria and West Africa (Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry [LCCI], 2023). The study was conducted at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS), Lagos Island, which hosted the 2025 edition of the Lagos International Trade Fair in November 2025. Tafawa Balewa Square is a central and accessible location regularly used for large-scale commercial exhibitions, attracting a diverse range of exhibitors and visitors. The 2025 trade fair featured SMEs from manufacturing, services, creative industries, agribusiness, and technology sectors, providing a suitable context for examining variations in branding strategies and engagement practices (LCCI, 2023; Wikipedia, 2026).

The population of the study comprised SMEs that participated as exhibitors at the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair. SMEs were selected as the focus of analysis due to their documented challenges with limited marketing resources and brand visibility within competitive urban markets such as Lagos (Adeniran & Johnston, 2021; Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022). A purposive sampling technique was employed to select SMEs that were actively engaged during the trade fair and willing to share insights regarding their branding experiences, allowing the study to focus on information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and on-site observations conducted during the trade fair period. The interviews provided qualitative insights into exhibitors' perceptions of brand visibility, customer engagement, and brand recall resulting from their participation. On-site observations focused on exhibition-related factors such as booth presentation, promotional materials, product demonstrations, and exhibitor–visitor interactions, all of which are central to experiential marketing and brand communication within trade fair environments (Kotler & Keller, 2022; Sun, 2025).

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and observational notes were reviewed, coded, and organized into themes reflecting key dimensions of trade fair participation and brand awareness, including visibility, recognition, recall, and perceived credibility. This analytical approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns within the data and facilitated interpretation of findings in relation to existing literature on SME branding and experiential marketing (Muchori & Reid, 2025; Mazikana et al., 2024). Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, with participation being voluntary and confidentiality assured, and all data were used solely for academic purposes (Adeniran & Johnston, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the qualitative analysis reveal that participation in the Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF) significantly enhanced brand awareness among participating small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Exhibitors consistently reported increased visibility resulting from sustained exposure to diverse audiences during the fair. The physical presence of SMEs at Tafawa Balewa Square, coupled with repeated visitor interactions, enabled brands to reach potential customers who may not have encountered them through conventional marketing channels. This finding aligns with the position that brand awareness is strengthened through frequent and meaningful exposure, particularly in environments that encourage direct engagement between firms and consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2022; Muchori & Reid, 2025). Observational evidence from the trade fair further indicated that booth location, visual presentation, and the clarity of brand messaging played a crucial role in shaping visitor perception. SMEs with visually appealing displays and clear brand identifiers were more likely to attract attention and sustain visitor interest, thereby improving brand recognition and recall. These observations support existing literature which suggests that experiential marketing platforms such as trade fairs enable SMEs to communicate brand identity more effectively through sensory and interpersonal cues than through purely digital or print media (Sun, 2025; Mazikana, Hove, & Mabenge, 2024). The interactive nature of the trade fair environment allowed exhibitors to explain product features, demonstrate value propositions, and respond directly to customer inquiries, reinforcing brand memorability.

Interview responses also revealed that interpersonal engagement was a central mechanism through which brand awareness was enhanced. SME representatives noted that face-to-face conversations with visitors helped establish trust and credibility, particularly for lesser-known brands. This finding reflects broader evidence that SMEs in developing economies benefit from relational marketing strategies that compensate for limited advertising budgets and brand equity (Adeniran & Johnston, 2021; Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022). The trade fair environment created opportunities for SMEs to humanize their brands, which positively influenced visitor perceptions and post-event brand recall. Despite these positive outcomes, the findings also highlight challenges that constrained the full branding potential of trade fair participation. Several SMEs reported difficulties related to financial limitations, high competition within the exhibition space, and limited marketing expertise. These constraints affected booth design quality, promotional material availability, and the ability to sustain engagement throughout the event. Such challenges are consistent with prior studies that identify resource constraints as a major barrier to effective branding and marketing among Nigerian SMEs (Nwali & Ntegeeh, 2022; Adesua-Lincoln, 2025). The findings suggest that while trade

fairs offer valuable branding opportunities, the benefits are unevenly distributed and depend on the strategic capacity of participating firms.

The results further indicate that trade fair participation complemented, rather than replaced, other marketing channels. Some SMEs reported that exposure gained during the LITF translated into increased social media engagement and follow-up inquiries after the event. This interaction between physical exhibitions and digital platforms underscores the importance of integrated marketing strategies for SMEs seeking to maximize brand awareness (Owolabi et al., 2024). The trade fair acted as an initial point of contact, while digital channels sustained brand visibility beyond the event, reinforcing the role of trade fairs as catalysts for broader marketing outcomes. In the context of Lagos as a competitive commercial environment, the findings demonstrate that trade fairs function as strategic branding spaces that enhance SME resilience and market positioning. Participation enabled SMEs to test market responses, observe competitor strategies, and refine their branding approaches, contributing to organizational learning and adaptability (Oiku, 2024). This adaptive capacity is increasingly important for SMEs operating in volatile and resource-constrained markets, where innovation and experiential engagement are essential for sustained performance.

Overall, the findings confirm that participation in the Lagos International Trade Fair significantly enhances brand awareness among SMEs by increasing visibility, strengthening recognition, and improving brand recall through experiential interaction. These outcomes support existing literature on the branding value of trade fairs in emerging economies and extend empirical understanding by situating these effects within the specific context of Lagos and the 2025 LITF at Tafawa Balewa Square (LCCI, 2023; Sun, 2025). The results underscore the need for deliberate participation strategies and supportive institutional frameworks to enable SMEs to fully leverage trade fairs as effective branding platforms.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how participation in trade fairs enhances brand awareness among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Lagos, using the November 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair held at Tafawa Balewa Square as the case context. The findings show that trade fair participation contributes meaningfully to improved brand visibility, recognition, and recall among SMEs by facilitating direct interaction with customers and sustained exposure within a competitive market environment.

The experiential nature of the trade fair enabled SMEs to communicate brand value, build credibility, and strengthen customer perception through face-to-face engagement, visual presentation, and product demonstration. However, the findings also reveal that financial constraints, high competition, and limited marketing capacity influenced the extent to which SMEs could fully maximize these branding benefits. Overall, the study highlights trade fairs as effective branding platforms for SMEs in Lagos, particularly when participation is supported by deliberate marketing strategies and institutional support. The findings provide useful insights for SME owners, trade fair organisers, and policymakers seeking to enhance the branding outcomes of exhibition-based marketing in emerging economy contexts.

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