

Customer Relationship Orientation and Business Resilience: A Study of SMEs in Ebonyi State

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ABSTRACT

The sweeping changes in the Nigerian economy and the economic policies of the state government are contributing to turbulence and dynamism in the business environment of Ebonyi State. The objective of this study is to examine the relationship between customer relationship orientation and business resilience with alignment to the relationship marketing theory and dynamic capability theory which are rarely used in literature. Data was collected using structured questionnaire. 261 questionnaires were collected, of which 245 responses were validated after data cleaning. Multiple regression through SPSS v25 software was used to analyze the proposed hypotheses with the results showing customer commitment, customer communication, customer responsiveness, and customer knowledge management as significant predictors of business resilience. The implication is that SMEs that focus on effective relationship with customers are more likely to be resilient in a challenging business economy. The study recommends capacity-building programs that emphasize on customer orientation and relationship marketing as key to improving business performance and surviving challenging business environment.

Keywords: Customer relationship orientation; Business resilience; Customer responsiveness; Customer commitment; Customer communication

1. Introduction

The business world is characterized by various sets of interconnected forces that are not only dynamic but complex and instrumental in shaping business operations. It consists of forces such as economic forces and technological forces that not only define business and consumer responses to business offerings but also disrupt business operations. The disruptions can be in the supply chain, reductions in demand, and increased transaction costs (Park & Seo, 2024) such as national policies like taxation (Ikpoto, 2023) and bank service charges, which come on the backdrop of COVID-19 effects and the removal of fuel subsidies. Nigeria's contemporary business environment is characterized by unprecedented uncertainties, rapid technological transformations, changing customer expectations, economic volatility, and increasing competitive intensity. For instance, Onakoya (2019) indicates the instability of the Nigerian business environment as characterized by the high cost of doing business, fluctuations of policy, and infrastructural decay. These factors have compelled organizations, particularly small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs), to prioritize resilience to be able to adapt to the disruptions.

The concept of business resilience extends beyond an organizational ability to recover from crisis. It encompasses an organization's capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from disruptions while also enabling organizations to learn from adversity, innovate continuously, and maintain operational continuity under challenging conditions (Park & Seo, 2024). It is connected to business performance as resilient organizations perform better than non-resilient ones, facilitates management and adaptation to uncertainty, and supports the development of different organizational capabilities (Salamzadeh et al., 2023). Resilience is not solely driven by internal resources but also by the external stakeholder relationships that include the customers. Customers represent valuable strategic assets of an organization. For instance, customers' exposure to a brand affects their behavior toward an organization and the internal business process performance (Abrokwah-Larbi, 2024). This puts Nigerian SMEs' 80% failure rate under five years in context (Ikpoto, 2023), which is attributed to customer-related factors such as lack of market need and customer ignorance (Okoro et al., 2020). Organizations that are able to develop stronger customer relationships by prioritizing customer requirements and satisfaction are better positioned to identify emerging market changes, respond faster, and sustain competitive advantage during periods of uncertainty (Bekata & Kero, 2024).

Customer relationship orientation is an organizational philosophy that prioritizes building, maintaining, and strengthening long-term relationships with customers through trust, commitment, responsiveness, communication, and value co-creation. Prior studies show that it is important following the demand of today's customers for personalized solutions, and provision of means to manage the relationships in ways that facilitates anticipation of customers' needs and provision of personalized experiences (Pascalau et al., 2024). The approach enhances business effectiveness, profitability, and customer satisfaction (Pascalau et al., 2024) while generating relational capital that can contribute to adaptability and business success. Customer relationship orientation focuses on maximizing customer lifetime value and brand loyalty and can shift towards mitigating operational risk, securing informal community protection, and stabilizing unpredictable cash flows. Also, localized customer orientation can act as a native operational shield in ways that can enable businesses to be sustainable and move past standard service delivery to the practice of a highly contextualized, empathetic value creation. For instance, strong customer relationships can facilitate collaborative problem-solving, innovation and service adaptation (Park & Seo, 2024).

SMEs in Nigeria account for significant economic growth and development, yet they often face significant constraints, including limited financial resources, infrastructure deficiencies, intense competition, inflationary pressures, and policy uncertainties (Mohammed, 2026). Under such conditions, maintaining enduring customer relationships may represent one of the most accessible and sustainable strategic resources for enhancing resilience. Prior studies demonstrate that customer relationships significantly contribute to SME resilience alongside technological capability, strategic partnerships, and employee engagement, highlighting the importance of relationship-based strategies in African business

contexts (Khanyile et al., 2025). However, the SMEs in Ebonyi State are not immune to the inherent challenges and disruptions in Nigeria's business climate. For instance, the incidences of arbitrary and exploitative revenue task forces (Premium Times, 2026), regional security and sit-at-home disruptions (Anoke et al., 2025) are posing significant challenges to business operations. While studies focus on regional security and sit-at-home disruptions (Anoke et al., 2025) limited attention has been devoted to customer relationship orientation as a direct antecedent of business resilience in the state. Against this backdrop, the study investigates the influence of customer relationship orientation on business resilience among SMEs in Ebonyi State.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To ascertain the influence of customer commitment on business resilience
2. To determine the influence of customer communication on business resilience
3. To identify the influence of customer responsiveness on business resilience
4. To ascertain the influence of customer knowledge management on business resilience

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does customer commitment influence business resilience?
2. What is the influence of customer communication on business resilience?
3. What is the influence of customer responsiveness on business resilience?
4. How does customer knowledge management influence business resilience?

2. Literature Review

Customer relationship orientation is a core marketing philosophy that reflects an organization's ability to build, manage, and sustain long-term relationships with customers. Although dimensions vary across studies, the following are the most widely used in literature: customer commitment and communication (Sin et al., 2005), customer trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), customer responsiveness (Saad et al., 2022), and customer knowledge management (Zahari et al., 2023).

Customer Commitment

This encompasses the organization's dedication to establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with customers. Organizations often leverage customer benevolence through their commitment to attain resilience (Verghese et al., 2019). The major points involve value delivery and a feedback loop in addition to trust that serves as a buffer. In times of crises, strong customer dedication can facilitate a safety net as a resilient organization protects service quality and trust when shock occurs. Prior studies show that customer commitment through effective relationship management builds resilience (Odonkor et al., 2024). Committed customers are likely to provide vital feedback that enables organizations to adapt and survive tough market shifts.

Customer Communication

This involves the extent to which the organization maintains timely, accurate, and two-way communication with customers. It can be significant for organizational resilience and approached through proactive alerts, honest accountability, and an active feedback loop. It is used as a strategy to impact organizational resilience (Dike, 2025) in ways such as reputation protection, loyalty retention, and faster recovery. Prior studies show that transparent communication facilitates business resilience (Odonkor et al., 2024), and adoption of crisis communication as a strategy during crises influences performance (Dike, 2025).

Customer Responsiveness

This is the ability of an organization to respond quickly and effectively to customer requests, complaints, and changing needs (Saad et al., 2022). This encompasses fast service speed, flexible delivery, and active customer feedback that may help organizations to survive crises and keep loyal customers. Prior studies show inconsistent results. Saad et al. (2022) confirm its effect on customer loyalty, while Tarkang et al. (2021) show a non-significant relationship in the telecommunication industry.

Customer Knowledge Management

This encompasses systematic collection, analysis, and use of customer information to improve products, services, and relationships. The concept informs that opportunities in the market are determined by the knowledge the customers have, transmitted knowledge from elsewhere to meet the customers' needs, and what is generally known about the customer (Zahari et al., 2023). It helps to build business by anticipating risk, especially during crisis times, where it may also enable fast adaptation and strengthening of customer retention. Extant literature shows that it influences innovation capability (Alani et al., 2023) and business performance by enhancing customer experiences and service quality (Pascalau et al., 2024).

Theoretical Review

The study was anchored on the relationship marketing theory (RMT). RMT was proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994). RMT argues that for organizations to achieve long-term business success, they should build, maintain, and strengthen their relationships with customers by focusing on trust, commitment, communications, empathy, and mutual value creation. Customer trust was omitted because of poor factor loadings and lack of statistical reliability and validity. The implication of the theory is that organizations that prioritize customer relationships are better positioned to retain customers, gain valuable market information, and respond effectively to changing environmental conditions. However, RMT has rarely been tested directly with business resilience as the dependent variable, although a growing body of research has applied RMT to explain how customer relationships enhance organizational resilience, especially during crises and environmental turbulence (see Runfola et al., 2023). RMT is relevant to this study given that customer relationship orientation encourages organizations to develop strong customer connections through relationship-building activities that increase customer loyalty, repeat patronage, and customer cooperation, especially during crisis periods.

However, RMT is complemented with dynamic capability theory (DCT) proposed by Teece et al. (1997), and it argues that organizations survive turbulent environments by sensing opportunities, seizing them, and transforming organizational resources (see Zafari, 2019). Following DCT, while customer relationship orientation facilitates continuous interaction with customers, enabling organizations to detect changing customer preferences, the information will allow organizations to innovate, adapt products and services, and respond rapidly to environmental disruptions, thereby enhancing resilience. Therefore, RMT is the anchor theory by defining a customer-centric, trust-based approach as essential for SMEs' survival against external shocks, while DCT acts as a complementary theory by providing the operational capacity to sense threats and reconfigure internal resources, effectively operationalizing the relationship marketing strategy for resilience.

The theories interact by having the marketing strategy define the goal of customer orientation, like customer focus and retention, which triggers dynamic capabilities to adjust operations, like changing communication channels to maintain the relationships during disruptions. However, RMT is often limited by the high maintenance costs and vulnerability of close bonds, while DCT is criticized for requiring unsustainable resource expenditure during adaptation. From the foregoing, the following hypotheses are advanced:

H1: Customer commitment has a significant positive influence on business resilience

H2: Customer communication has a significant positive influence on business resilience

H3: Customer responsiveness has a significant positive influence on business resilience

H4: Customer knowledge management has a significant positive influence on business resilience

3. Methodology

The study followed a quantitative survey approach. A structured questionnaire was designed and administered to SME owners. The characteristics of the SME owners in this study include enterprises that have at least 10 employees (see Oloveze et al., 2023). Prior to full-scale questionnaire administration, a pilot test was conducted on 10 SME owners in Ebonyi State to examine the clarity, reliability, and suitability of the questionnaire. They were excluded from the main survey. Following the feedback, minor revisions were made on the wording of a few questions. The sampling frame consisted of 2,433 SMEs in Ebonyi State (SMEDAN & NBS, 2017) and confirmed via the official registry from Salt City Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (SALTCCIMA). An a priori power analysis was used to arrive at a sample size of 261 following a statistical power of $(1 - \beta)$ 0.80 for regression with four predictors, α (0.05), and an effect size of f^2 (0.0461). Purposive sampling was adopted while the initial list was filtered using the screening question “I have at least 10 workers that I pay every month,” which was used to improve data quality and eligibility. Initial contact was established via phone calls and follow-up visits. Purposive sampling was complemented with snowball sampling which enabled referrals and facilitated reaching the respondents that met the criteria. Questionnaire was used in data collection and scaled using a 5-point Likert scale, moving from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Ethical standard was followed as the study prioritized participant anonymity, informed consent, and confidentiality. Ethical approval was secured from the departmental level by the Research Committee of the Department of Marketing, Ebonyi State University. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used. Cronbach’s alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) were used for reliability evaluation. Convergent and discriminant validity were used for validity evaluation.

4. Results and Discussion

SPSS v25 was used in the analysis. A total of 261 questionnaires were collected from contacts that expressed initial interest and ultimately participated in the survey after formally approaching 307 contacts via initial contacts and the snowball approach. This represents an 85% response rate. The primary reason for non-participation was time constraints and corporate privacy policies regarding operational data. After data cleaning, 16 copies were removed for inappropriateness and non-eligibility. This represents 6% while the valid copies used was 245 copies (93.9% retention rate after data cleaning), while the final response rate is 79.8% which is adequate for the study. The demographic profile on Table 1 shows 51.0% were male, 49.0% were female. 25.7% of respondents in the sample are within 18–29 years old, 48.6% were within 30–39 years old, and 25.7% were 40 years old and above. 68.6% were married, 31.4% were single.

Table 1: Demographic profile

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male: 125	51.0
	Female: 120	49.0
Age	18–29 years: 63	25.7
	30–39 years: 119	48.6
	40 years and above: 63	25.7
Marital status	Single: 77	31.4
	Married: 168	68.6

The sampling adequacy was confirmed given the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure value of .900. Common method bias was assessed through the Harman's single-factor technique. The value of 49.4% met the 50% threshold. The reliability assessed through the CA and CR on Table 2 shows the following values for CComit (.915), CCom (.935), CRs (.781), CKM (.851), and BR (.932); and the CR values for CComit (.881), CCom (.892), CRs (.806), CKM (.881), and BR (.836), thereby confirming reliability as the threshold for CA and CR is .70 (Hair et al., 2010). Convergent validity was satisfied through the FL and AVE following Bagozzi and Yi's (1988) recommendation of a minimum threshold of 0.60 for FL and 0.50 for AVE. The discriminant validity as recommended by Hair et al. (2010) involves inter-item correlation matrix not exceeding .85, average variance extracted (AVE) of .50 or more, and root of AVE exceeding the correlation matrix. These were met as indicated on Table 2 for AVE that ranged from .58 to .73 and on Table 3 where all correlations were below .85 and the root of AVE was higher than the correlations except for BR.

Table 2: Factor analysis, reliability and validity assessment

Variable	Item and wording	FL	CA	CR	AVE
Customer commitment (CComit)	CComit1: Long-term customer retention is a priority	.845	.915	.881	.71
	CComit2: My business is committed to meeting customer needs	.855			
	CComit3: I view customer relationship as a strategic asset	.830			
Customer communication (CCom)	CCom1: I have regular communication with my customers	.838	.935	.892	.73
	CCom2: I communicate clearly when answering customer inquiries	.849			
	CCom3: I share relevant product or service information	.883			
Customer responsiveness (CRs)	CRs1: I promptly resolve complaints	.822	.781	.806	.58
	CRs2: I respond quickly to service requests	.779			
	CRs3: I am flexible in meeting customer expectations	.680			
Customer knowledge management (CKM)	CKM1: I collect customer feedback	.815	.851	.881	.71
	CKM2: I use customer information for decision-making	.903			
	CKM3: I monitor changing customer preferences	.809			
Business resilience (BR)	BR1: My business adapts quickly to changes	.799	.932	.836	.63
	BR2: My business recovers rapidly from unexpected disruptions	.775			
	BR3: My business continues operations during difficult periods	.805			

Table 3: Discriminant validity

	CCom	CComit	CRs	CKM	BR
CCom	.854				
CComit	.793	.843			
CRs	.493	.420	.762		
CKM	.343	.359	.468	.843	
BR	.837	.770	.586	.432	.794

Note: Root of AVE in bold at the diagonal.

4.1 Test of Hypotheses

Multiple regression was used in analyzing the hypotheses using 1% and 5% p-values. As indicated on Table 4, the R is .878, the adjusted R² is .768, the R² is .772, indicating 77.2% variance in business resilience. However, 70% variance was from a bivariate correlation between customer communication and business resilience. This leads to the non-interpretation of the R² as a standard model strength, as it indicates a substantial conceptual and statistical overlap, suggesting the constructs tap into underlying dimensions of organizational adaptation. The F-statistic (4, 240) = 202.847 provides a better fit than a model with no predictors. Multicollinearity was examined through tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) as indicated in Table 4. The multicollinearity diagnostics indicated no evidence of multicollinearity among the predictors, given that the tolerance values were greater than .10 and VIF values were below 5.0, thereby confirming that the predictor variables were sufficiently independent for multiple regression analysis. The analysis further shows that customer commitment (H1: B = .201; p < .001), customer communication (H2: B = .545; p < .001), customer responsiveness (H3: B = .252; p < .001), and customer knowledge management (H4: B = .072; p < .05) are significant predictors of business resilience among the SMEs in Ebonyi State.

Table 4: Results of hypotheses

Variable	Hypotheses	Unstd B	SE	Std. β	T	Sig	Tolerance	VIF
Constant		.364	.190		1.918	.056		
CComit	H1: CComit→BR	.201	.040	.190	4.984	.000	.656	1.525
CCom	H2: CCom→BR	.545	.056	.518	9.790	.000	.340	2.942
CRs	H3: CRs→BR	.252	.051	.253	4.933	.000	.362	2.760
CKM	H4: CKM→BR	.072	.034	.075	2.094	.037	.749	1.335

R: .878 | Adjusted R²: .768 | R²: .772 | F-statistic (4, 240) = 202.847

4.2 Discussion

This study confirmed that customer commitment, customer communication, customer responsiveness, and customer knowledge management each significantly influence business resilience. Although customer communication has the strongest relationship, its lack of clear discriminant validity with business resilience shows a measurement limitation as they overlap such that the effect is interpreted with caution. Rather than an isolated predictor, it entangles with business resilience, suggesting that in practice, effective customer communication and maintenance of internal resilience can be a combined cohesive approach and not separate operational levers. However, customer knowledge management has the weakest relationship with business resilience, thereby revealing the need for SMEs to effectively manage the information from their customers. The result reinforces the view that customer relationship orientation is a strategic capability that enhances organizational resilience by strengthening customer loyalty, facilitating organizational learning, and improving adaptive capacity.

The result of customer commitment on business resilience shows that SMEs that are committed to developing long-term relationships with customers are more likely to remain resilient during times of uncertainty. This aligns with Odonkor et al. (2024) on organizations leveraging the benefits of commitment to adapt and survive during tough times. Customer commitment fosters trust, loyalty and repeat patronage thereby providing organizations with a stable customer base that supports revenue continuity during turbulent times. Committed customers are more likely to maintain relationships with organizations despite temporary service disruptions thereby enabling SMEs to recover faster. This aligns with the theory of relationship marketing by Morgan and Hunt (1994) that argues commitment as the fundamental requirement in developing enduring customer relationships that enable organizations to remain sustainable.

The significant result of customer communication buttresses the importance of communication which must be timely, effective and transparent to elicit positive results. This result supports extant literature (Dike, 2025). The result shows that communication is very important during times of uncertainty. Essentially, regular communication helps organizations to know evolving trends, customer needs and expectations and enable them to manage disruptions and maintain customer confidence. When communication is open, it facilitates rapid dissemination of information and encourages customer feedback enabling SMEs to make informed strategic decisions. According to Odonkor et al. (2024) businesses that are able to proactively communicate effectively are able to preserve customer trust and reduce uncertainty.

The finding on customer responsiveness influencing business resilience demonstrates that organizations that are capable of responding quickly to customer complaints and queries and changing customer demands are more resilient in dynamic business environments. This is consistent with extant report (Saad et al., 2022). Responsiveness reflects organizational flexibility and agility enabling organizations to modify products and services to changing market conditions while also being able to enhance customer satisfaction and minimize the adverse effects of disruptions. In line with the dynamic capability theory by Teece et al. (1997), organizations that possess the capability to sense environmental changes, seize emerging opportunities and reconfigure their resources are more likely to survive disruptions.

The finding on customer knowledge management was also confirmed to be related to business resilience thereby suggesting that SMEs that systematically collect, analyze, and utilize customer information are better prepared to anticipate market changes and respond to unexpected disruptions. The finding supports Alani et al. (2023) and reveals that customer knowledge provides valuable insights into customer preferences, purchasing behavior and emerging market trends. This enables the SMEs to make evidence-based decisions and develop innovative solutions during periods of disruptions. However, the weak prediction of CKM does not imply it is unimportant; rather, it suggests that knowledge creation alone is insufficient to enhance business resilience while explaining direct relational factors having a stronger immediate influence.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The results demonstrate that customer relationship orientation constitutes a critical organizational capability for enhancing business resilience. The combined relationship of customer commitment, customer communication, customer responsiveness, and customer knowledge management provide a practical strategy for improving resilience and ensuring business continuity, especially where the SMEs face economic volatility, infrastructural challenges, and intense competition. Therefore, the findings highlight the strategic importance of relationship marketing in strengthening organizational resilience and achieving sustainable business success.

Recommendations

Therefore, from the perspective of customer communication and its overlap with business resilience, it is recommended that SMEs integrate communication channels directly into the business continuity and management planning. This can be done by building a standby emergency communication plan, adopting transparent communication to maintain cash flow, using communication channels as early warning signals via real-time feedback loops, and training staff on resilience-driven communication. Also, SMEs should develop a strategy that makes them readily available, quicker to respond without delay, and able to fix complaints and problems fast. Again, rewarding loyalty with discounts can enhance customer commitment in addition to showing care and keeping promises. For SMEs to manage customer knowledge, it is recommended that they personalize services, write things down like customer names and favorite items, and use sales data to identify the needs of customers.

Limitations of the Study

Although purposive sampling was necessary to ensure inclusion of the required units in the sample, it statistically limits generalizability given non-random selection. The cross-sectional approach is also a limitation. A longitudinal survey is better for robust causation. The data relied on a sampling frame that is nine years old, which may not exactly represent contemporary business realities. The single-state scope limits the geographical generalizability of the findings. Also, the omission of the significant variable, customer trust, due to measurement constraints limits the study's ability to test the full theoretical framework. Lastly, the discriminant validity constraints call for caution because of the statistical overlap, while the common method bias affects the observed relationship, especially with the 49.4% being closer to the threshold.

Directions for Further Studies

Future research should use refined scales to better untangle these closely related dimensions. Subsequent studies must operationalize the omitted core construct, customer trust, to complete the anchor theory framework. Replicating the study across multiple states using an updated sampling frame will improve external validity. Lastly, future studies should pair perceptual surveys with objective firm-level data, while multi-source data collection is encouraged to eliminate common method bias.

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