

Integrating Public Relations and Islamic Marketing Strategies for Enhancing Brand Trust and Consumer Engagement among SMEs in Sokoto State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Introduction: Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Sokoto State play a vital role in local economic development. However, limited research has examined how they integrate Public Relations (PR) and Islamic marketing principles to build consumer trust and strengthen brand reputation. This study addresses this gap by exploring how SMEs apply ethical communication rooted in Islamic values within their marketing and Public Relations practices. Relationship Marketing Theory, the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model, and the Islamic Business Ethics Framework guide the study. **Research Methods:** The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews with owners of Small and Medium Enterprises, Public Relations practitioners, and Islamic scholars. **Results:** The findings revealed that while SME operators value honesty, fairness, and transparency, most lack formal Public Relations strategies that align with Islamic ethical principles. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that integrating Public Relations with Islamic marketing ethics enhances consumer trust and supports long-term business growth. The study contributes theoretically by linking Islamic ethics with modern communication models and practically by

	recommending culturally grounded Public Relations capacity-building initiatives.
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INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) serve as the cornerstone of Sokoto State’s economic development, contributing significantly to employment generation, poverty reduction, and sustainable development (SMEDAN & NBS, 2022). Over 80% of Sokoto’s population is engaged in agricultural production as a source of income generation, alongside artisanal industries such as blacksmithing, weaving, and leatherwork that rely on local raw materials and sustain rural livelihoods (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021). Recognizing their importance, the Sokoto State Government has implemented entrepreneurship support programs through the Sokoto State Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SOSMEDA), in collaboration with federal institutions, private organizations, and financial institutions, to provide funding, training, and market linkages (SOSMEDA, 2025). These initiatives, including youth-focused financing schemes exceeding ₦1 billion and infrastructural and digital empowerment programs, aim to strengthen SME productivity and market access.

Beyond financial and infrastructural support, the sustainability of SMEs increasingly depends on their ability to build trust-based relationships with consumers. Public Relations (PR), as defined by Grunig and Hunt, is a strategic management function centered on continuous and planned communication that fosters mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 330). For SMEs with limited promotional budgets, PR offers cost-effective avenues such as stakeholder engagement, community interaction, and earned media to enhance visibility and reputation. In contemporary digital environments, particularly through social media platforms, PR further enables two-way communication, feedback, and relationship-building with consumers.

To conceptually ground this interaction, the study draws on Grunig and Hunt’s Two-Way Symmetrical Model and the Islamic Business Ethics Framework as complementary theoretical foundations. The Two-Way Symmetrical Model assumes that effective communication is dialogic rather than persuasive, emphasizing mutual understanding, responsiveness to stakeholder feedback, and ethical intent. However, scholars have noted that this model can be idealistic, particularly for SMEs that face resource constraints, informal organizational structures, and limited capacity to sustain systematic feedback mechanisms. Despite these challenges, the model offers a normative benchmark for ethical and relationship-oriented communication, which is particularly relevant for small businesses seeking to establish long-term trust rather than short-term promotional gains.

The Islamic Business Ethics Framework reinforces this ethical orientation by viewing business and marketing as moral activities rather than value-neutral transactions. Rooted in Islamic teachings, it emphasizes truthfulness (*ṣidq*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), fairness (*ʿadl*), and the avoidance of deception (*gharar*) in commercial practices. These principles are supported by Islamic injunctions that mandate honesty and justice in trade, positioning ethical conduct as a foundation for legitimacy, social welfare, and spiritual accountability. Operationally, this framework implies that SMEs are expected to communicate transparently about product quality, engage fairly with customers, and avoid exploitative pricing or misleading promotional practices. While adherence to these values may occasionally conflict with competitive pressures and profit motives, they are essential for sustaining long-term trust within Muslim communities.

In Sokoto State, where religious values, cultural norms, and business practices are deeply intertwined, the integration of ethical PR communication with Islamic marketing principles becomes particularly significant. Nevertheless, many SMEs struggle to systematically align modern PR strategies with Islamic moral values, despite the availability of religious guidance and institutional support. Previous studies have paid limited attention to how Islamic ethics shape communication practices, customer relationship management, and brand positioning among Muslim entrepreneurs in northern Nigeria (Olayemi & Umar, 2021; Bello & Ibrahim, 2022). This gap suggests that the absence of structured, ethically grounded PR practices may hinder brand trust, consumer engagement, and the long-term development of SMEs, even in contexts with strong faith-based and financial support systems (Daily Trust, 2024).

Accordingly, this study investigates how SME owners in Sokoto State integrate Public Relations and Islamic marketing principles in their business operations, and how ethical values such as *ṣidq*, *amānah*, and *ʿadl* contribute to building brand trust and consumer engagement. It further examines how religious and cultural beliefs influence communication strategies used by SMEs in managing customer relationships. By integrating modern communication models with Islamic ethical frameworks, this study aims to provide a culturally grounded understanding of PR practices that reflects the socio-religious realities of Sokoto State, thereby contributing to both scholarly discourse and practical communication models for faith-based business environments in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a phenomenological design to investigate how small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owners in Sokoto State perceive the integration of Public Relations (PR) and Islamic marketing strategies in fostering consumer trust and engagement. Phenomenology is an ideal approach because it emphasizes understanding individuals' lived experiences from their own perspectives. According to Moustakas (1994, p. 21), phenomenology enables researchers to uncover the essence of a phenomenon as it is subjectively experienced. Given the cultural and religious dynamics of Sokoto, a

predominantly Muslim region, this design offers valuable insights into how ethical values shape business communication practices among SMEs.

The study involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eleven purposively selected SME operators who use social media, particularly Facebook, to promote their brands while consciously adhering to Islamic business ethics. This sampling method is typical in qualitative research and ensures the inclusion of information-rich participants who have direct experience of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The interviews were conducted in English and Hausa, lasted 45–60 minutes, and allowed participants to narrate their practices in their own words.

Ethical principles such as trust (*amānah*), truthfulness (*ṣidq*), and fairness (*ʿadl*) were central to the participants' communication strategies. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, which involves identifying significant statements, developing meaning units, clustering them into themes, and synthesizing the results to capture the core of participants' experiences. Key themes included ethical brand communication, value-based customer engagement, and the role of religious identity in PR strategy.

To ensure research validity and trustworthiness, the study employed techniques such as member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling, following the principles outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314). These approaches minimized bias and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

The theoretical frameworks informed both the interview protocol and the analytical process. The Two-Way Symmetrical Model was used as a conceptual lens to examine SMEs' communication practices, particularly dialogue, feedback mechanisms, and relationship-building with consumers through social media interactions. Meanwhile, the Islamic Business Ethics Framework guided the interpretation of ethical dimensions in marketing and Public Relations practices, focusing on values such as trust (*amānah*), truthfulness (*ṣidq*), and fairness (*ʿadl*). These frameworks shaped the identification and interpretation of themes during the phenomenological analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The findings are derived from qualitative interviews with SME owners, PR practitioners, and Islamic scholars in Sokoto State. Data were analyzed thematically, resulting in three interrelated analytical dimensions that explain how Islamic ethical principles shape Public Relations (PR) and marketing communication practices among SMEs. These dimensions highlight ethical communication as a key aspect of business identity, the role of Islamic values in fostering trust and engagement, and the impact of culture and faith on relational communication. Each dimension is supported by coded interview excerpts and interpreted in relation to the study's guiding theoretical frameworks.

Ethical Communication as a Core Business Identity

Participants consistently described communication as an extension of their religious and moral identity rather than merely a promotional tool. Several SME owners emphasized that their business messages intentionally incorporate Qur'anic verses or Hadith to convey honesty and sincerity. One clothing business owner explained that sharing Islamic teachings on social media helps to “build trust and show moral consistency” (Participant 3). Similarly, a bookstore manager stated that “PR means fulfilling promises and treating customers fairly,” reflecting the Prophetic model of ethical conduct (Participant 7).

These accounts suggest that SMEs intentionally incorporate *ṣidq* (truthfulness) and *ikhhlāṣ* (sincerity) into their brand communication, positioning faith-based authenticity at the heart of their PR identity. This finding aligns with the Islamic Business Ethics Framework, which conceptualizes commercial activity as a form of moral accountability (Alserhan, 2011). It supports Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model, which emphasizes ethical dialogue and mutual respect between organizations and stakeholders.

Islamic Ethical Values as Foundations of Trust and Consumer Engagement

The findings further reveal that Islamic ethical values—particularly *ṣidq*, *amānah* (trustworthiness), and *ʿadl* (fairness)—play a central role in fostering consumer trust and sustained engagement. Participants reported that transparency regarding product quality, pricing, and limitations strengthens customer confidence and loyalty. One halal catering business owner noted that “telling the truth even when it reduces profit” ultimately earns long-term customer commitment (Participant 2). Likewise, an owner of an Islamic gift shop explained that fairness in handling complaints “keeps customers recommending us” (Participant 5).

These insights demonstrate that SMEs perceive ethical conduct as both a spiritual responsibility and a strategic communication practice. This perspective aligns with Relationship Marketing Theory, which emphasizes trust, ethical reciprocity, and commitment as the foundations of enduring business relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It also reflects the Qur'anic injunction to “give full measure and weight in justice” (Qur'an 11:85), situating honesty and fairness as essential mechanisms for building brand trust within Islamic market contexts.

Religious and Cultural Influences on Relational Communication

Religious and cultural norms were also found to influence how SMEs interact with their customers significantly. Participants described their communication practices as relational, personalized, and guided by Islamic etiquette (*adab*). Standard practices included greeting customers with a smile, inquiring about their well-being, and offering assistance without immediate expectations of a purchase. One respondent remarked that such interactions “create *barakah* (blessing) and goodwill,” even when they do not lead directly to sales (Participant 6).

Moreover, communication strategies were often adapted to religious occasions, such as offering Ramadan discounts or distributing small gifts accompanied by Qur'anic messages. These practices reflect a form of faith-based marketing intertwined with community-oriented Public Relations. Such culturally embedded communication aligns with the Qur'anic call to "cooperate in righteousness and piety" (Qur'an 5:2) and exemplifies the dialogic orientation of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model, where empathy, reciprocity, and mutual understanding underpin long-term relationships.

Synthesis

Across all themes, the findings reveal that Sokoto SMEs operationalize PR and marketing as moral and relational practices rather than as commercial transactions alone. Ethical communication, grounded in Islamic teachings, functions as both a religious obligation and a strategic asset for building brand trust. This synthesis bridges modern PR theory and Islamic ethics, illustrating how culturally embedded values can enhance communication effectiveness, customer loyalty, and business sustainability within faith-driven contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm that while SME owners in Sokoto State Value Islamic ethical principles such as truthfulness (*ṣidq*), trust (*amānah*), and fairness (*'adl*), their communication practices often remain informal and unstructured. This aligns with previous studies suggesting that SMEs in developing contexts tend to rely on personal relationships and informal reputation-building rather than institutionalized Public Relations strategies. The integration of Islamic ethics into business communication thus represents both a moral imperative and a potential strategic advantage.

Public Relations (PR) within Islamic marketing is not merely about persuasion or image management; rather, it embodies sincerity (*ikhhlās*), transparency, and accountability in communication. The Qur'an warns against the distortion of truth: "And do not mix the truth with falsehood or conceal the truth while you know [it]" (Qur'an 2:42), establishing truthfulness as a foundational communication ethic. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of honesty in trade, teaching that blessings accompany transactions conducted with openness and fairness (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 2079). These teachings reinforce the view that PR in an Islamic framework must be ethically grounded, prioritizing moral integrity over promotional gain.

The Islamic Business Ethics Framework complements contemporary communication theory, particularly Grunig and Hunt's Two-Way Symmetrical Model, which advocates for ethical dialogue and mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. While conventional PR emphasizes image management, the Islamic approach calls for ethical engagement rooted in social responsibility. This harmony between modern PR theory and Islamic ethics offers a conceptual model that encourages SMEs to pursue communication strategies that are both professionally strategic and spiritually accountable.

Islamic marketing provides a broader spiritual and social context for business conduct. It calls for marketing practices that are ḥalāl (permissible) and ṭayyib (pure), ensuring that all forms of communication and trade uphold justice and social welfare. In Sokoto, where Islamic identity shapes commercial life, integrating PR with Islamic marketing principles enables SMEs to gain both market credibility and moral legitimacy. Through the incorporation of amānāh (trustworthiness) into product representation, pricing, and advertising, businesses not only enhance consumer trust but also improve their religious standing in the community.

This integration also aligns with the Qur'anic command to "Give full measure and weight in justice and do not deprive people of their due" (Qur'an 11:85), and the Prophetic warning that "He who cheats is not one of us" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 102). SMEs that adhere to such principles cultivate long-term consumer relationships based on mutual respect and shared values, core features of both Islamic business ethics and relationship marketing theory.

The Sokoto context underscores that faith-based ethics can serve as a guiding framework for modern PR practice in culturally religious societies. The convergence of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model with Islamic ethics suggests that effective PR must be dialogic, transparent, and community-oriented. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that ethical alignment with Islamic norms enhances brand reputation, a conclusion supported by studies showing that consumers in Muslim-majority societies prioritize trust and integrity over aggressive advertising.

Theoretically, this study extends PR scholarship by situating ethical communication within a faith-driven paradigm, thereby offering a localized model of PR that integrates moral accountability with strategic dialogue. Practically, it highlights the need for targeted PR training programs that enable SMEs to operationalize Islamic values in their marketing and communication. Such initiatives could strengthen consumer trust and support long-term business sustainability across northern Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the integration of Public Relations (PR) practices with Islamic marketing principles to enhance brand reputation, consumer confidence, and ethical communication among Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) business owners in Sokoto. The research is grounded in Relationship Marketing Theory, the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model, and the Islamic Business Ethics Framework. The research captured the perspectives of SME owners, Public Relations professionals, and Islamic scholars. The results revealed that among these enterprises, Public Relations and marketing are viewed as moral and communal duties rather than merely promotional or profit-driven tools, reflecting a deeply rooted connection between business operations and Islamic ethical values.

The findings revealed three central themes that define how SMEs communicate with their publics: ethical communication, trust-based engagement, and culturally grounded relationship management. As the moral compass guiding their operations and customer relations, most business owners emphasized values such as ṣidq (truthfulness), amānāh (trust), and 'adl (fairness). This harmony between professionalism and spirituality illustrates how Islamic ethics can inform sustainable business practices and foster brand trust within a faith-oriented marketplace. By adopting these principles into their marketing and

communication processes, Small and Medium Enterprises cultivate credibility and foster a sense of shared trust with their customers.

The study supports the relevance of Relationship Marketing Theory and the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model within Islamic settings, from a theoretical standpoint. This relevance emphasizes transparency, dialogue, and mutual understanding among Small and Medium Enterprises, which reflect the core principles of symmetrical communication. The inclusion of Islamic values adds a distinctive ethical dimension that is often missing from conventional marketing models. The findings extend these theories by showing that, in religiously influenced societies, moral accountability and justice are not peripheral considerations; they are central to how communication and relationship management operate. The research highlights the need for capacity-building programs that integrate Islamic ethical teachings with modern communication and marketing strategies. Training initiatives should be developed to help SMEs apply principles such as *amānah* and *‘adl* in branding, digital engagement, and customer interaction.

Organizations like the Sokoto State Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SOSMEDA) and other business support institutions can play a key role in designing culturally appropriate PR frameworks that emphasize transparency, fairness, and respect. Such interventions can enhance SMEs' competitiveness while preserving their ethical and spiritual identity. This study contributes to the broader conversation on the intersection of religion and business ethics in emerging economies, providing insights that extend beyond its empirical findings. It bridges a significant gap between public relations theory and Islamic marketing practice, demonstrating that moral integrity and spiritual accountability can coexist with strategic communication. The integration of faith-based ethics not only strengthens brand authenticity but also promotes consumer loyalty and sustainable entrepreneurship, especially in Muslim-majority settings where ethical expectations are closely tied to religious beliefs.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the integration of Public Relations (PR) and Islamic marketing practices among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Sokoto State. First, SME owners are encouraged to institutionalize Islamic-oriented PR practices, including transparent communication, ethical storytelling, and community engagement, to reinforce brand identity and ensure alignment with Shariah-based business values.

Second, relevant agencies such as the Sokoto State Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SOSMEDA) and local business associations may enhance their capacity-building programs by incorporating training on Islamic business ethics, particularly principles of truthfulness (*ṣidq*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), and fairness (*‘adl*), which this study identifies as central to building brand trust and consumer loyalty.

Third, SMEs may benefit from adopting communication strategies that reflect local religious and cultural norms, including respectful interaction styles and context-appropriate religious messaging, to strengthen customer relationships and brand authenticity.

Fourth, government bodies and financial institutions could consider developing support mechanisms that recognize ethical compliance and transparency in SME operations, linking access to financial assistance with demonstrated moral and social responsibility.

Finally, collaboration among universities, Islamic scholars, and PR practitioners is recommended to facilitate applied research and professional workshops that bridge the gap between theory and practice, enabling SMEs to translate Islamic ethical principles into practical and measurable communication strategies.

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