

Entrepreneurial Competencies and Sustainable Business Practices of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises in Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract- *This study focused on the effects of entrepreneurial competencies on the sustainable business practices of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Southeast Nigeria. Two specific objectives guided the study, to determine the influence of business mindset competency on adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs in South East, Nigeria. The study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was gathered through a well-structured questionnaire entitled; “Entrepreneurial competencies and sustainable business practices of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria.” The population of the study involved all the management staff and employees of the ten (10) selected leading technopreneurs SMEs firms within the Southeast region of Nigeria which was 632 staff. The study combined both purposive sampling techniques and random sampling techniques. The study adopted face and content validity techniques in validating the research instrument. The study used Ordinary Least Square Regression analysis to analyze the study objective with the aid of Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Findings revealed that; at 5% level (Sig < .05) of significance, business mindset competency had a positive and significant effect on the adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria. The study concluded that entrepreneurial competencies positively and significantly affects sustainable business practices of SMEs in Southeast Nigeria. Therefore, the study recommended that entrepreneurs need to cultivate a growth-oriented, proactive business mindset within their organizations and to encourage creative thinking, resilience, and adaptability, ensuring that employees at all levels are equipped to respond effectively to market and environmental changes.*

Indexed Terms- *Entrepreneurial competencies, sustainable business practices, SMEs.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) play a critical role in the economic development of nations, serving as engines of innovation, employment, and poverty alleviation. SMEs are widely recognized as vital contributors to economic growth and development, particularly in developing regions such as Southeast Nigeria. Despite their importance, many SMEs struggle to survive and grow in increasingly competitive and dynamic markets. One of the key determinants of their success lies in the entrepreneurial competencies of their owner and the adoption of suitable business practices (Addah & Dokai-okonkwo, 2024). Entrepreneurial competencies espouse skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours that are essential for identifying opportunities, managing resources effectively, and navigating uncertainty. They are essential for innovation, strategic planning, resource management, and effective leadership. Entrepreneurial competencies assist SMEs owners in recognizing industry opportunities, marshalling resources and delivering products and services effectively and efficiently (Ibidunni, Ogundana & Okonkwo, 2021). The combined utilization of competencies affords SMEs some measure of competitive advantage as well as the chance to thrive, achieve high performance and ensure sustainability (Danibrahim, Kohor, & Indiran, 2022).

The integration of sustainable business practices into SMEs encompasses a range of initiatives to minimize environmental impact while maintaining economic viability (Cao & Weerawardena, 2023). Sustainability consists of fulfilling the needs of the current generations without compromising the needs of the

future generations, while ensuring a balance between economic growth, environmental care and social wellbeing (Kaigama, 2023). Sustainable business practices in SMEs embrace various strategies such as energy efficiency improvements, waste reduction, sustainable sourcing, and adopting renewable energy sources. These initiatives mitigate environmental harm and position SMEs as responsible corporate citizens, enhancing their brand reputation and customer loyalty (Nkwini & Akinola, 2023). Sustainability link to contemporary entrepreneurial competence can be understood through a set of appropriate competencies used to accomplish key occupational tasks at a satisfactory or superior level (Ituen, 2022). However, the increase in complexity and volatility of modern business environments, especially in developing regions like Southeast Nigeria, highlights the need for adaptable and resilient entrepreneurial competencies tailored to specific socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Competencies such as business mindset, opportunity recognition, networking, financial literacy, and resilience are especially crucial in Southeast Nigeria. Nevertheless, these competencies need to be matched with sustainable business practices that are flexible to the local context. Practices such as adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions, business growth, and customer relationship management, often determine whether an SME can compete effectively and survive over time. Thus, efforts directed towards enhancing SMEs sustainability and eventual growth has been of immense concern to notable stakeholders. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurial competencies and sustainable business practices shape SMEs outcomes, with implications for policy and enterprise development programmes. Against this backdrop, the study: Entrepreneurial competencies and sustainable business practices of small and medium scale enterprises in Southeast Nigeria was initiated.

A. Statement of the Problem

In today's business world, Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) are frequently left defenseless and powerless in the face of rising economic and competitive challenges worldwide, particularly in developing countries (Ismail, 2022). As a result, 70%

or more of the SMEs are unsustainable and do not often survive beyond five years (Imran et al., 2019). Therefore, the transition from the maturity stage to a sustainable stage is the biggest challenge faced by SMEs in developing countries. The Nigerian Central Bank (CBN) indicated that the SMEs sub-sector in Nigeria underperformed in comparison to other developing nations. SMEs struggle with challenges ranging from huge gaps in infrastructure, poor financial support and credit environment, high level of unskilled workforce and low investment commitment to breed business ideas into commercial scale (Financial System Strategy, 2020). Furthermore, inadequate competency from the side of the entrepreneur and bad managerial skills has been blamed as one of the major challenges impeding SMEs sustainability.

Entrepreneurial competencies, including business mindset competency, networking competency innovation and resource management, are critical for navigating the complexities of the business environment in Southeast Nigeria. However, there is insufficient empirical evidence on the extent to which SME owners in the region possess these competencies and how effectively they apply them in day-to-day business operations to adapt at changing market and environmental conditions, and in propelling business growth. Moreover, there is a disconnect between the competencies entrepreneurs exhibit and the business practices they implement, which can lead to poor strategic alignment, inefficiency, and business failure. Furthermore, many SMEs adopt informal or outdated business practices that are not well-suited to the rapidly changing economic and technological landscape. The lack of alignment between entrepreneurial capabilities and appropriate business strategies further exacerbates the challenges SMEs face, limiting their growth potential and competitiveness. Therefore, to proffer solution to these challenges, the study: Entrepreneurial competencies and sustainable business practices of small and medium scale enterprises in Southeast Nigeria was deemed imperative.

B. Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study was to ascertain the effect of entrepreneurial competencies on sustainable business practices of small and medium scale

enterprises in Southeast Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- i. determine the influence of business mindset competency on adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs in Southeast, Nigeria.
- ii. examine the effect of networking competency on business growth of selected SMEs in Southeast, Nigeria.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

C. Entrepreneurial Competencies

An essential starting point in understanding entrepreneurial competencies is to define the concept of entrepreneurship itself. Aruwa (2016) defines entrepreneurship as the willingness and ability of an individual to seek investment opportunities and successfully establish and operate an enterprise. Entrepreneurship is closely tied to entrepreneurial opportunities, which are the environmental conditions conducive to the introduction of new products or services. Phillion, (2020) opined that entrepreneurial is a process of using skill acquired to created new business ideal that will yield positive impart in the society. On the other hand, competence is the integration and combination of knowledge and skills that can be observed and measured which contributes to enhanced performance, and ultimately lead to entrepreneurial success (Al Mamun & Fazal, 2018). Entrepreneurial competencies are components for entrepreneurial activities, which are seen as behavioral elements (Umar, 2018). Entrepreneurial competencies refer to a set of skills that are used in establishing and managing businesses (Riyanti, Suryani, Sandroto & Soeharso, 2022).

D. Sustainable Business Practices

Sustainability has been interpreted by Atkinson et al. (2007) as an on-going process in which equity; ethical considerations, economy, and ecology have been combined in a way to address the needs of present and future generations of all living beings. Similarly, Diri (2021) defined corporate sustainability as the responsiveness of an organization towards its work

force, community, and the environment which the business operation is carried out. The appropriateness of the concept for this research derives from the fact that it is a framework that advocates the need to integrate economics and ecology not just for the protection of the environment, but also to promote development (Don-Baridam & Diri, 2022).

E. Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs)

In Nigeria, a small-scale and medium enterprise is defined as any enterprise with a maximum asset base of N50 million (excluding land and working capital) with no lower or upper limit of staff (SMEEIS, 2015). Small and medium enterprises are business organisations with a limited number of employees and capital that contributes to the growth and development of a country (Fatoki, 2018). Ikprior, Nnadu and Itumo (2017) opined that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are different kind of firms that could be found in different business activities across the country. They include artisans producing local agricultural implements, the coffee shop owners, tailor shop owners, iron fabricators, roadside mechanics, small transport firm, the internet café, small engineering or software firm and a medium-sized automotive parts manufacturer.

F. Business Mindset Competency

The business mindset are also refers as entrepreneurial mindset. Kuratko, Fisher and Audretsch, (2020) define an entrepreneurial mindset as how an entrepreneur thinks, behaves, and feels in entrepreneurship. This definition specifies three dimensions of entrepreneurial mindsets which are the entrepreneurial cognitive dimension, entrepreneurial conative dimension, and entrepreneurial affective dimension. It is a state of mind that predisposes human conduct toward entrepreneurial activities and outcomes. The entrepreneurial mindset as a state of mind is reflected in the definition that is offered by Damianus, Gladys, Basilio and Fredolin (2020). The state of mind changes the status of the person to become an entrepreneur because such a mind enables the individual to see new opportunities.

G. Adaptation to Changing Market and Environmental Conditions

Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2016) defined organisational adaptation as intentional decision making undertaken by organizational members, leading to observable actions that aim to reduce the distance between an organization and its economic and institutional environments. Adaptation is a specific type of intentional change aimed at increasing convergence between the organisation and (some of) its environment(s). Armed with this definition, one can easily distinguish adaptation from its triggers (e.g., pursuing change, responding to institutional pressure) and consequences (e.g., performance, survival). Ultimately, not every change is necessarily adaptive and not every adaptive move necessarily increases organisational performance. This guides scholars toward consistent uses of adaptation that can resolve ambiguities and promote new insights for both disciplinary and interdisciplinary research (McMahan & Evans, 2018).

H. Networking Competency

The idea of networking is powered by the fact that firms cannot survive and prosper solely through their individual effort, and that each firm's performance depends upon the activities and performance of others (Human & Naude, 2015). Turyakira and Mbidde (2015) defined networking as "The free association of the business with the aim of sharing information, resources and capabilities through cluster, strategic alliance or business collaboration". The researchers further explained that the prosperity of networking is generated based on mutual trust, commitment, shared knowledge and valuable associations that empowers business to propagate and survive. Networking could be in the form of cluster, business collaborations and strategic alliance and has become popular as a competitive tool among SMEs (Human & Naude, 2015).

I. Business Growth

Growth is considered as a phenomenon which is determined by various factors, in and out of control by the owner or the management of small business. In the words of Hilka (2016), growth is the product of an internal process in the development of an enterprise and an increase in quality and/or expansion. Growth is defined as a change in size during a determined time span" (Hilka, 2016). Hilka (2016), stated researched

entrepreneurs' ideas on growth and listed the following: increase in sales, increase in the number of employees, increase in profit, increase in assets, increase in the firm's value and internal development.

J. Theoretical Review

The study was anchored by Resource Based Theory were propounded by of Penrose (1959), and were later expanded by Wernerfelt's (1984), Rumelt (1984), Barney (1996), and Dierickx and Cool (1989). Resource-Based Theory espoused that sustainable business performance results from resources that are inimitable, not substitutable, tacit in nature, and synergistic (Al Ansari, 2014). Based on this theory the intellectual capital is a main resource to improve enterprise growth. It can be human (characteristics, knowledge, skills, and capabilities), organisational (technology, processes, patents, and networks), and social (links with customers, suppliers, and partners), all of which are important strategic resources/assets which the firm needs to propel its innovation efforts alongside increasing and sustaining competences and capabilities.

Adopting this theory, entrepreneurial competencies are considered intangible resources, as they include business mindset competency and networking competency. Within the SME environment in Southeast Nigeria, these competencies become even more critical due to the volatile business climate, infrastructural challenges, and limited access to external support. This theoretical foundation supports the central argument that the strategic deployment of unique and well-developed competencies is a key driver of SME success in challenging business environments.

K. Empirical Review

Addah and Dokai-okonkwo (2024) in their study, examined the effect of entrepreneurial competence on the sustainability of manufacturing SMEs in Delta State Nigeria. The specific objectives are to determine the effect of strategic competency, and to examine the effect of learning competency; on the sustainability of manufacturing SMEs in Delta State. The study adopts a survey research approach, using questionnaire administration for data generation from a sample of 327 owners/manager of the selected manufacturing

SMEs. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The t-test from regression analysis (statistical package for social science, version 25.0) was used for test of hypothesis. Findings showed that strategic competency ($t= 7.19$, $p= 0.014$, $\beta=.813$), and learning competency ($t= 9.02$, $p= 0.002$, $\beta=.804$); had significant/positive effect on the sustainability of the SMEs. The study recommends that management of the SMEs should continuously embrace strategic competence as an enabler through establishing, evaluating and executing firm's strategies, as it will enhance their sustainability in delivering innovative products and keep the firm in a better competitive posture.

Kaigama (2023) examined the influence of entrepreneurial competencies on the sustainable performance of small business by developing causal model using data obtained from small business in north-eastern Nigeria. A quantitative research approach was employed with aid of structural questioners to collect primary data from 307 small business owners/managers. The outcomes indicate that entrepreneurial competence plays an influential role in influencing small business performance. Specifically, relationship competencies; conceptual competencies; organizing competencies; strategic competencies; commitment competencies, and learning competencies; positively influence small business performance.

Nobelson and Suharyati (2023) examined the impact of an entrepreneurial growth mindset on entrepreneurial performance by involving technopreneur competencies as a mediator. Quantitative research was conducted with 100 micro sector MSMEs in the Sawangan and Bojongsari areas, Depok City as samples, using the purposive sampling method. Data analysis was carried out using Smart PLS 3.0 software. The results of the SEM PLS analysis showed that the entrepreneurial growth mindset had a positive and significant effect on technopreneur competence. These results also revealed that the positive impact of an entrepreneurial growth mindset on entrepreneurial performance occurs through the mediator of technopreneurial competence, indicating the important role of technopreneurial competence in linking these two factors.

Vaishali (2024) explored the entrepreneur's adaptability mindset and its impact on business sustainability to raise awareness among entrepreneurs to accept adaptability as a vital business skill and strategize to navigate their businesses accordingly. Research methods include qualitative data from a sample population of twenty-five small and medium-scale entrepreneurs from different states of India. Purposive sampling techniques was applied using semi-structured in-depth telephonic interviews. The data were analyzed using inductive coding of phrases and the frequency of words and phrases were searched to create a thematic analysis. The result revealed a positive and strong correlation between entrepreneurs' adaptability mindset and its impact on business sustainability. The research revealed a strong correlation between the entrepreneur's adaptability and business sustainability variables.

Egwakhe, Omonijo, Bamidele and Umukoro (2024) examined organisational outcomes: Entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurial competence combined effect. The study applied the cross-sectional survey research design in obtaining primary data from 383 top, middle, and low-level management staff of selected FMCG in Lagos State, Nigeria. The stratified random sampling technique was utilized. Also, the reliability and validity tests on the adapted questionnaire were considered credible before applying it to the study. Results from the multiple regression analysis revealed that entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurial competence significantly had a combined effect on organisational outcome. The study recommended that management should establish a clear vision and mission that aligns with the entrepreneurial spirit and foster continuous learning culture and improvement to enhance overall organisational outcomes.

Ekeh, Tsetim and Oguche (2019) carried out a study to examine the effect of networking on the performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs). The study focused on SMEs in Makurdi metropolis. The study adopted the survey research design. The target population for the study consisted of 708 owners/senior management staff of SMEs in Makurdi metropolis in Benue State, Nigeria. These consisted of different sectors like food processing (24), livestock rearing (32), schools (86) trading (164),

art/craft (42), baking (34), table water (17), fashion and designing/ hair dressing (97), ICT (92), health (65) and transportation (55). 256 respondents were sampled. The questionnaire was used as the research tool for data collection. The research tool consisted of two 4-point Likert questionnaires. The 256 questionnaire copies administered met a 0.83 response rate. With the aid of SPSS version 21, multiple regression analysis was used to test the strength of the effect of network dimensions on performance of SMEs. Findings of the study revealed that network structure has significant effect on the performance of SMEs in Benue State. The study concluded that the structure, governance and content of networks maintained by SMEs have significant effect on their performances. The study recommended that management of SMEs should be mindful of the content of their networks since the network content has significant effect on the performance of SMEs.

Jafar, Saqlain, Mohammad, Mohd and Shaher (2019) investigated the relationship between Entrepreneurial Business Networks (EBN) and sustainable performance of small firms. The investigation aimed to examine the relationship between EBN and small firms' sustainable performance by applying the Smart PLS-SEM software V-3.2.8. The study explores how dynamic capabilities mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial business network and sustainable performance of small firms. The data received reports on small firms, manufacturing surgical instruments. The findings indicated that the entrepreneurial business network had a significant positive relationship with dynamic capabilities, which in turn presented a positive relation to a sustainable performance of small firms. The results also revealed that firms using business networks and dynamic capabilities efficiently; achieved their sustainable performance. The findings indicated that the study proposed a holistic and systematic model to achieve sustainable performance through firms' dynamic capabilities.

Hans, Anders and Heikki (2023) evaluated the entrepreneurial networks, geographical proximity, and their relationship to firm growth: A study of 241 small high-tech firms. Start-up firms in high-tech sectors normally engage in networking to overcome their lack

of resources, knowledge, and competence constraints. A newly established firm's network can provide a source of social capital, which may enhance its growth prospects. In the study, 241 new technology-based firms (NTBFs) in Sweden are studied during their early formative years to investigate how entrepreneurial networks and the geographical proximity to actors in these networks affect the early performance of these firms in terms of growth. Three underlying factors were identified in the analysis: geographical proximity and professional and consultative networks. The study finds that professional networks have a positive and significant effect on NTBFs' growth, which indicate that utilizing these networks benefit the growth of both young and growing firms. NTBFs in initial stages can acquire business opportunities by constructing professional networks.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study made use of survey design. The study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was gathered through a well-structured questionnaire entitled; "Entrepreneurial competencies and sustainable business practices of small and medium scale enterprises in Southeast Nigeria." The questionnaire was structured type, designed in five points Likert Scale (Strongly Agree = SA, Agreed = A, Neutral = N, Disagreed = D and Strongly Disagreed = SD). Secondary data was sourced from; textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines and other relevant internet materials. The population of the study consisted of all the management staff and employees of the ten (10) selected leading technopreneurs SMEs firms within the Southeast region of Nigeria which was 632 staff. Based on the population of 632 staff, a normal confidence level of 95% and error tolerance of 5% were used to deduce the actual sample size for the study. The sample size was calculated using Godden (2004) formula and was 253 respondents. To obtain the actual number of the study respondents that were sampled from each of these technopreneurship SMEs firms, Bowley's proportional allocation formula was applied. The table below showed the study population and sample size.

Table 1, distribution of the target population and sample size drawn from the ten (10) leading technopreneurial SMEs in South East Nigeria.

S/N	SMEs	States	Population	Sample Size
1	Abia Tech Hub	Abia	42	17
2	DeGlobal Technologies	Imo	84	34
3	Derapid Technologies and Services Limited	Ebonyi	66	26
4	Genesy Tech Hub	Enugu	79	32
5	Hydrogen Technologies Software Solution	Anambra	52	21
6	Lloydant Business Services	Enugu	68	27
7	Losintech	Ebonyi	65	26
8	Rad5 Tech Hub	Abia	34	14
9	Sidmach Technology	Abia	94	38
10	Silicon Africa Technology Ltd	Imo	48	18
	Total		632	253

Source: Field Survey 2025.

The study combined both purposive sampling techniques and random sampling techniques. Firstly, the researcher used purposive sampling techniques to select the ten leading technopreneurship SMEs firms in Southeast Nigeria. Secondly, the researcher adopted purposive sampling techniques to seek for the Chief Executive Officers and management staff of these technopreneurship SMEs firms, in order to elicit firsthand information required for the study. Thirdly,

the researched used random sampling techniques to sample the employees of these technopreneurship SMEs firms. The study adopted face and content validity techniques in validating the research instrument. A test-re-test method to check the reliability of the research instrument was used. The study used Ordinary Least Square Regression analysis to analyze the study objective with the aid of Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.

IV. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 2, Ordinary Least Regression analysis result on the influence of business mindset competency on adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions by selected SMEs in Southeast, Nigeria.

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.222	0.082		14.822	0.000
Business mindset competency	0.978	0.028	0.923	35.497	0.000
R ²		0.853			
R ²		0.842			
F-Statistics		1260.007			

- Dependent Variable: Adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions.
- Predictor: Business mindset competency.
- Source: Field Survey 2025.

The result in Table 2 revealed that business mindset competency with the regression coefficient of (0.923) is significant and positively affect the adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria at 5% level

(Sig < .05) of significance. The result signified that an increase in business mindset competency will lead to a positive increase in the adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria by 0.923. Therefore, at 5% level (Sig < .05) of significance, business mindset competency had a positive and significant effect on the adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria.

The R- square which shows the proportion of variation in the dependent variable that can be explained by the

independent variables revealed that 85.3% of the total variation in the adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria was explained by the variation in business mindset competency. While the Adjusted R explains the effect of decrease in the degree of freedom arising from the independent variable. The F-statistics (1260.007) is significant at 5% level, which shows the overall significance of the entire model. Therefore, the independent variables in the model were significant in explaining the change in the dependent variable.

Table 3, Ordinary Least Regression analysis result on the effect of networking competency on business growth of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria.

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.756	0.092		19.143	0.000
Networking Competency	0.801	0.030	0.874	26.529	0.000
R ²		0.763			
R ²		0.751			
F-Statistics		703.770			

- Dependent Variable: Business growth.
- Predictor: Networking competency.
- Source: Field Survey 2024.

The result in Table 3 revealed that networking competency with the regression coefficient of (0.874) is significant and positively affect the business growth of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria at 5% level (Sig < .05) of significance. The result signified that an increase in networking competency will lead to a positive increase in the business growth of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria by 0.874. Therefore, at 5% level (Sig < .05) of significance, networking competency had a positive and significant effect on the business growth of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria.

The R- square which shows the proportion of variation in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variables revealed that 76.3% of the total variation in business growth of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria was explained by the variation in

networking competency. While the Adjusted R explains the effect of decrease in the degree of freedom arising from the independent variable. The F-statistics (703.770) is significant at 5% level, which shows the overall significance of the entire model. Therefore, the independent variables in the model were significant in explaining the change in the dependent variable.

L. Discussion of Findings

The results in Table 2, revealed that: At 5% level (Sig < .05) of significance, business mindset competency had a positive and significant effect on the adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria.

The result is in tandem with the findings of Vaishali (2024), Egwakhe, Omonijo, Bamidele and Umukoro (2024), Nobelson and Suharyati (2023). Vaishali (2024) explored the entrepreneur's adaptability mindset and its impact on business sustainability to

raise awareness among entrepreneurs to accept adaptability as a vital business skill and strategize to navigate their businesses accordingly. The researcher revealed a positive and strong correlation between entrepreneurs' adaptability mindset and its impact on business sustainability. Egwakhe et al., (2024) examined organisational outcomes: Entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurial competence combined effect. The researchers revealed that entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurial competence significantly had a combined effect on organisational outcome. Nobelson and Suharyati (2023) examined the impact of an entrepreneurial growth mindset on entrepreneurial performance by involving technopreneur competencies as a mediator. The researchers revealed that entrepreneurial growth mindset had a positive and significant effect on technopreneur competence.

The results in Table 3, revealed that: At 5% level (Sig < .05) of significance, networking competency had a positive and significant effect on the business growth of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria.

The result is in agreement with the findings of Ekeh, Tsetim and Oguiche (2019), Jafar, Saqlain, Mohammad, Mohd and Shaher (2019), Hans, Anders and Heikki (2023). Ekeh et al., (2019) carried out a study to examine the effect of networking on the performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Makurdi metropolis. The researchers revealed that network structure has significant effect on the performance of SMEs and network governance has significant effect on the performance of SMEs in Benue State. Also, the result indicated that network content has significant effect on the performance of SMEs in Benue State. Jafar et al., (2019) investigated the relationship between Entrepreneurial Business Networks (EBN) and sustainable performance of small firms. The researchers revealed that entrepreneurial business network had a significant positive relationship with dynamic capabilities, which in turn presented a positive relation to a sustainable performance of small firms. Hans, et al., (2023) evaluated the entrepreneurial networks, geographical proximity, and their relationship to firm growth: A study of 241 small high-tech firms. The researchers revealed that professional networks have a positive and significant effect on NTBFs' growth, which

indicate that utilizing these networks benefit the growth of both young and growing firms.

V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

M. Summary of Findings

This study examined the effect of entrepreneurial competencies on sustainable business practices of small and medium scale enterprises in Southeast Nigeria. The following findings were made:

- i. At 5% level (Sig < .05) of significance, business mindset competency had a positive and significant effect on the adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria. The result signified that SMEs firms that possess a strong business mindset respond effectively to shifts in the market or environmental changes.
- ii. At 5% level (Sig < .05) of significance, networking competency had a positive and significant effect on the business growth of selected SMEs firms in Southeast, Nigeria. The result implied that SMEs firms that are better at networking will experience growth, and networking skills contribute to the growth of SMEs firms.

N. Conclusion

This study explored the effects of entrepreneurial competencies and sustainable business practices of small and medium scale enterprises in Southeast Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that key entrepreneurial competencies, namely business mindset competency, and networking competency have a significant and positive effect on the sustainable business practices of the studied firms. Thus, entrepreneurial competencies positively and significantly affects sustainable business practices of small and medium scale enterprises in Southeast Nigeria.

O. Recommendations

The following recommendations are deemed imperative for implementation:

- i. Entrepreneurs need to regularly sustain their business mindset competency as it had a positive and significant effect on their adaptation to changing market and environmental conditions. However, they need to cultivate a growth-oriented, proactive business mindset within their organizations and to encourage creative thinking, resilience, and adaptability, ensuring that employees at all levels are equipped to respond effectively to market and environmental changes. Also, they need to adopt flexible and adaptable business models, diversify their products, services and explore alternative sales channels.
- ii. Entrepreneurs need to constantly maintain their networking competency as it positively and significantly affects their business growth. Furthermore, they need to prioritize building and nurturing relationships with key stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, investors, mentors, and industry peers. By attending industry conferences, and networking forums, they will expand their professional networks and access valuable opportunities for business growth. Also, entrepreneurs need to take advantage of online platforms like LinkedIn, industry-specific forums, and social media to connect with potential partners, customers, and collaborators. Establishing a strong online presence will help them expand their reach and tap into global networks that will drive their business growth.

P. Contribution to Knowledge

The following are the contributions to knowledge emanating from this study:

- i. One of the study's novel contributions is demonstrating how networking competency has a direct, positive effect on business growth. It highlights the importance of strategic relationship-building, not just for immediate opportunities, but for long-term growth and sustainability. This insight provides valuable guidance for SME owners in Southeast Nigeria on the importance of leveraging networks to access new markets, partnerships, and resources.
- ii. The study provides important insights into how a business mindset competency; encompassing

strategic thinking and market awareness, enhances the ability of SMEs to adapt to changing market and environmental conditions. This contribution is particularly relevant in an era where SMEs must rapidly adjust to global trends, regulatory changes, and technological advancements.

- iii. The study presents practical recommendations for policymakers and business support organisations. By emphasizing the role of entrepreneurial competencies on sustainable business practices of SME, the research advocates for the integration of competency-based training, capacity-building initiatives, and policy frameworks that foster innovation and networking skills. This will inform the development of more targeted programmes aimed at strengthening the SME sector in Southeast Nigeria.

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