EFFECT OF SELF AWARENESS AND SELF MANAGEMENT ON EMPLOYEES' PERFORMANCE OF PRIVATE HOSPITALS IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

[1]AKOLO, Markus Michael & [2]Dr. Abdul Adamu
[1*2]Department of Business Administration, Nasarawa State University, Keffi
email: mikeakolo7@gmail.com[1] adamuabdulmumeen@nsuk.edu.ng[2]

Abstract
The healthcare industry in North Central Nigeria is confronts by a distinctive array of challenges impacting its employee's performance. These challenges include limited healthcare resources and high patient volumes creating a demanding environment both physically and emotionally. This study therefore examines the effect of self-awareness and self-management on employee performance in private hospitals located in North Central Nigeria. A survey research design is employed, targeting 242 doctors and nurses from registered and insured private hospitals across the six states of North Central Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Data is collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate a positive but insignificant effect of self-awareness on employee performance. However, self-management demonstrates a significant positive effect on employee performance. The study concludes that while self-awareness may not have a statistically significant impact on employee performance in private hospitals in North Central Nigeria, it remains a valuable trait for healthcare professionals. On the other hand, self-management skills significantly enhance employee performance, emphasizing the importance of investing in programs to improve these skills among healthcare workers. Based on the findings, the study recommends implementation of training programs and workshops to enhance self-awareness and self-management skills among healthcare employees, utilizing tools such as self-assessment, mindfulness training, and stress management resources, aimed at improving overall performance and productivity.
Keywords: *Healthcare, Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Employees' Performance, Private Hospitals*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, employees are fundamental assets of every organization playing a crucial role in its overall efficiency and competitiveness. Employee's performance is a complex concept that involves various aspects such as completing tasks, achieving organizational set goals, interpersonal skills, adaptability, and contributing to organizational objectives. The economy is rapidly evolving in contemporary society, competition continues to increase, and organizational success has become one of the most significant measures of how to develop better and better in the face of global competition. Companies today want to hire or train new workers who are able to go beyond their current positions to maximize performance.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has attracted substantial attention from business experts and intellectuals in recent years. This personality-related aspect has been widely argued by educationists in the field of behavior and management sciences (Alotaibi et al., 2020; Naz et al., 2019). As the global environment today is extremely diverse, the emotional understanding and the output of employees need to be linked. Emotional intelligence is therefore important for the presentation of the company and for the growth as workers are determined primarily to achieve their objectives. The emotions of the employee also play a vital role in helping them navigate this stimulating climate of transition (Alonazi, 2020).

In Nigeria, recent years have witnessed the swift movement towards globalization and competitiveness among organizations thereby creating a need for emotionally competent officers in organizations to tackle the shifts and competitiveness and contend with situations however cumbersome they may be. As such the purpose of this probe is to examine the relationship emotional intelligence has with job satisfaction of the employees under study. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is operationalized in terms of self-awareness, self-management, empathy and social awareness Akinlabi, et al. (2020).

Organizational performance is often defined as the extent to which an organization is able to achieve its goals and objectives (Mohammed & Al-Zoubi, 2019). Research has shown that EI can have a positive impact

on various aspects of organizational performance, including job satisfaction, employee engagement, and leadership effectiveness (Goleman et al., 2013).

Emotional Intelligence (EI), as delineated by Gomez (2017), comprises these fundamental components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. For the purpose of these seminar, the researcher focused on two of these components. Self-awareness involves recognizing and comprehending one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, along with understanding personal strengths, weaknesses, values, and personality traits. Gomez underscores self-awareness as foundational to emotional intelligence, essential for managing emotions and relationships effectively. Self-management, on the other hand, entails regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in various situations, including stress management and goal setting. Gomez highlights self-management as pivotal for achieving personal and professional success. Together, these components form the bedrock of emotional intelligence, empowering individuals to navigate emotions adeptly and attain their objectives.

In the dynamic landscape of the healthcare sector, where the stakes are high and the demand for exceptional patient care is relentless, the significance of emotional intelligence (EI) emerges as a cornerstone of organizational success. This research looks into the dimensions of EI and its profound impact on shaping workplace dynamics, with a focused lens on private hospitals in North Central Nigeria. The healthcare industry in this region faces a unique set of challenges that create a complex tapestry influencing optimal employee performance. Limited resources, coupled with high patient loads, contribute to an environment that can be both physically and emotionally demanding.

Despite the acknowledged significance of emotional intelligence, private hospitals in North Central Nigeria encounter barriers to optimal performance. The existing challenges necessitate a deeper understanding of the intricacies of emotional intelligence tailored to the specific context of healthcare work in this region. It is within this framework that the research aims to identify the factors hindering optimal employee performance and explore how emotional intelligence can be leveraged as a strategic tool to address these challenges.

Previous research by Goleman (2017), Salovey and Mayer (2019), Yoke & Panatik (2016), Konstantinos et al. (2016), Khalili et al. (2018), Sandhya et al. (2019), Zhang et al. (2020), Jones et al. (2020), Wang et al. (2021), and Oluwatosin et al. (2022) provides foundational insights into emotional intelligence. However, the direct applicability of these insights to the healthcare industry in North Central Nigeria remains uncertain. This research aims to fill this critical gap by conducting a comprehensive investigation on the "effect of emotional intelligence on employee performance" taking into account the unique challenges faced by private hospitals in North Central Nigeria. The main objective of this study will be to examine the effect of self awareness and self management on employee's performance of Private Hospitals in North Central Nigeria. Other specific objectives are;

i. analyze the effect of self-awareness on employee's performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.
ii. determine the effect of self-management on employee's performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.

Based on the stated objectives above, the following null hypotheses will be formulated to guide the researcher.

Ho₁: Self-Awareness has no significant effect on employee's performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.

Ho₂: Self-Management has no significant effect on employee's performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Self-Awareness
According to Walker et al. (2022), self-awareness consists of self-comparison in introspection and self-evaluation. Rasheed et al. (2019) assert that self-awareness might be situational or dispositional. Situational

self-awareness is a natural process by which a person distinguishes the self by internalized qualities and then makes adjustments to decrease any instability or irregularity (Kishkilev, 2018). Dispositional self-awareness refers to self-responsiveness or self-concentration associated with a person's tendency to look inward and reflect on the self (Fenigstein et al., 1975). Newman and Nezlek (2019) propose that dispositional self-awareness has both good and negative manifestations. In negative self-perception, the emphasis is on negative emotions, depression, mood, weakness, and obstacles to solving social problems (Altan et al., 2022). Good self-awareness reflects the positive effects of physiological mindfulness, in-depth self-awareness, and desired self-improvements (Newman & Nezlek, 2019). These good and negative results of self-awareness have substantial effects on occupational performance. Recent research indicates that almost 90% of managing directors sense a connection between the workplace and the health and well-being of their staff (Hall, Garabiles, & Latkin, 2019). Self-awareness is also associated with important outcomes such as increased job performance and satisfaction Budworth & Chummar (2022) and more effective professional decisions (Kim, Schuh, & Cai, 2020). The relationship between good self-awareness and work outcomes demonstrates that training has prospective and actual benefits for employers, employees, and organizations' self-awareness."

Self-Management

Self-management constitutes a broad range of coping mechanisms and practices, hence why we utilized three independent variables that we believe entrepreneurs can manage for decreasing stress, increasing a sense of security, and increasing job satisfaction. Self-management practices are consistent with the underlying foundation of self-leadership in which it is based. Specifically, self-leadership consists of specific behavioral and cognitive strategies designed to positively influence personal effectiveness. Self-leadership strategies are typically partitioned into three primary categories, including behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies and constructive thought pattern strategies (Neck et al. 2019).

Self-management practices are also related to job satisfaction and the higher the practice of self-management, the higher the job satisfaction (satisfaction). Some, if not virtual, believe that it is impossible to please employees with different expectations if the practice of self-management is very limited. I think job satisfaction is a relative concept (As'ad, 2018). Shows that self-management practices can increase job satisfaction. This is a key concept that is a prerequisite for forming a relationship between employees and the organization. Job satisfaction includes personal cognitive policies and practices and the work environment regarding employee retirement, employee development, employee salaries, employee retention, communication within the organization, and termination of employment. This is an emotional reaction.

Employee's Performance

Employee performance is a concept that encompasses the actions, behaviors, and outcomes of individuals within an organization. Motivation, goal-setting, feedback, and coaching are significant factors that influence employee performance. By understanding these factors and implementing effective performance management practices, organizations can optimize employee performance, leading to improved productivity, job satisfaction, and overall organizational success.

Performance is the impact of activities of an individual over a given period of time. Managing employees' performance is necessary in order to achieve goals. According to Shahzad et al (2011), assessing an employee's competency and measuring his productivity is essential in the overall plan of the organization. Pacing itself production is important and cannot be done if the employee's potential and his ability to perform are not measured. Employees' performance is directly related to organizational productivity and its success. Better performance of each employee creates immense outcomes which mainly include congruence among employees' quality production and commitment at work place (Saddam & Muhammad, 2010).

Empirical Review
Self-Awareness and Employee's Performance

Atuma and Agwu (2015) investigated the relationship between self awareness and organizational performance in the Nigerian banking industry. The study was a survey and the sample for the study consisted

of two hundred and ten bank managers in South-South area of Nigeria. Data were collected mainly in the cities where we have high concentration of the banks through interview. Four hypotheses were formulated and tested using the spearman rank correlation coefficient with the aid of statistical package for social science. The results of our analysis at .05 level of significance showed that self awareness is positively related to net profit and return on investment, but no strong relationship was found between self awareness and market share. Our interview results also supported our findings.

Bethuel et al., (2022) investigated the effect of Self-awareness on the performance of employees of commercial banks in Kenya. Performance of employees was measured by efficiency, productivity, turnover and quality of work output, which are all covered in literature review. A cross-sectional descriptive research design was used. The population was 31,605 employees of 38 commercial banks in Kenya. The study sample was 395 respondents, which was attained using proportionate stratified sampling method. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from respondents. The theory underpinning the study was hierarchy of needs theory. The study formulated the null hypothesis and tested it using the spearman correlation coefficient aided by the statistical package for social sciences. The analysis results at 0.05 level of significance showed that self-awareness has a statistically significant influence on the performance of employees of commercial banks in Kenya.

Self-Management and Employee's Performance

Emeasoba and Chinwe (2020) assess the problem solving and self-management skills required of business education students for job performance in colleges of education in South East, Nigeria. It adopts the descriptive survey design. Two research questions and two hypotheses tested at .05 level of significance were used. Population consisted of 147 Business Educators in public colleges of education in South East, Nigeria. A validated questionnaire with reliability coefficients of 0.78 was used for data collection. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze research questions while t-test statistics was used to test the hypotheses. Based on the data analysis, it was found that the itemized problem-solving skills and self-management skills were required by business education students for job performance in an organisation. The findings of the study showed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female business education lecturers on the identified problem-solving skills and self-management skills required of business education students for job performance in an organisation.

Olusegun et al., (2022) examined the interaction between emotional intelligence and employee performance in selected private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. A research survey was employed in this study. The population was 1464 full-time academic staff of selected six private Universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. The sample size of 308 was determined using Raosoft calculator. A structured and adapted questionnaire went through validity and reliability tests with Cronbach Alpha ranges between 0.728 and 0.954. The study revealed that self-management had significant relationship with employee research output (r (296) = 0.803, p < 0.05). This study concluded that self-management affects employee research output in selected private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework
Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Performance Model

Daniel Goleman popularized the concept of emotional intelligence in 1995, when he wrote the landmark book 'Emotional Intelligence'. He defined emotional intelligence as "abilities of being able to motivate one self and survive in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to manage one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope" (Goleman, 1995). Based on this, Goleman then categorized emotional intelligence into four different capabilities that include: social skills, self – awareness, social awareness and self – management. Self-consciousness is the capacity to understand and recognize one's emotions by using instinctual feelings to direct choices. Self-management includes regulating one's thoughts and desires and helps people to respond to changing conditions.

According to this model, emotional intelligence is not just a personal quality that is beneficial in and of itself, but rather it is a key factor in determining an individual's ability to perform well in a professional setting.

The model proposes that emotional intelligence can be broken down into four main domains, each of which is critical for high performance in the workplace. These domains are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Self-awareness is the foundation of emotional intelligence, and involves the ability to recognize and understand one's own emotions, as well as to accurately assess one's strengths and weaknesses. Self-aware individuals are better able to regulate their emotions and behaviors, and are more likely to make rational decisions.

Considering the research topic "effect of emotional intelligence on employees' performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria," the researcher chooses Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Performance Model to anchor this study. This model aligns closely with the practical application of emotional intelligence in workplace settings, emphasizing domains such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. The model provides a holistic view that encompasses both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of emotional intelligence. Applying this model to the research allows for a nuanced exploration of how different dimensions of emotional intelligence influence the performance of healthcare professionals in private hospitals.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a survey research design. This design is most suitable for the present study because of the kind of research objectives that the study wishes to attain. The study ascertains the effect of emotional intelligence on the performance of private hospitals in north central Nigeria. The population of this study cover six hundred and fourteen (614) Doctors and Nurses of all the registered and insured private hospitals operating within the six (6) states of North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria and the FCT. These states include; Niger, Kwara, Benue, Nasarawa, Kogi, Plateau and the FCT, Abuja. According to Federal Ministry of Health Report, the numbers of registered and insured private hospitals within the North Central Region of Nigeria are captured as 71 private hospitals. The sample size of the study is arrived at using the Taro Yammane sampling determination formula as shown below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N (e)^2}$$

Therefore, the sample size of the study is 242 doctors and nurses of registered and insured private hospitals in the six North Central States and FCT. So as not to fall short of the minimum sample size of 242, it was advised by Israel (2013) that 10% to 20% should be added to the minimum sample size. Therefore, 20% was added back to the minimum sample size thus: $0.20 \times 242 = 48.4 + 242 = 290$

Primary data was collected with a structured questionnaire which was made up entirely of closed ended questions. This study analyzed the data using descriptive statistics like the mean, median, maximum and standard deviation to analyze the characteristics of the variable. The Partial Least Square Structural equation model (PLS-SEM) was used to model the regression analysis used to test the hypothesis to determine if there is an effect relationship between each of the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Model Specification

The Structural Equation Model adopted for this study is as follows
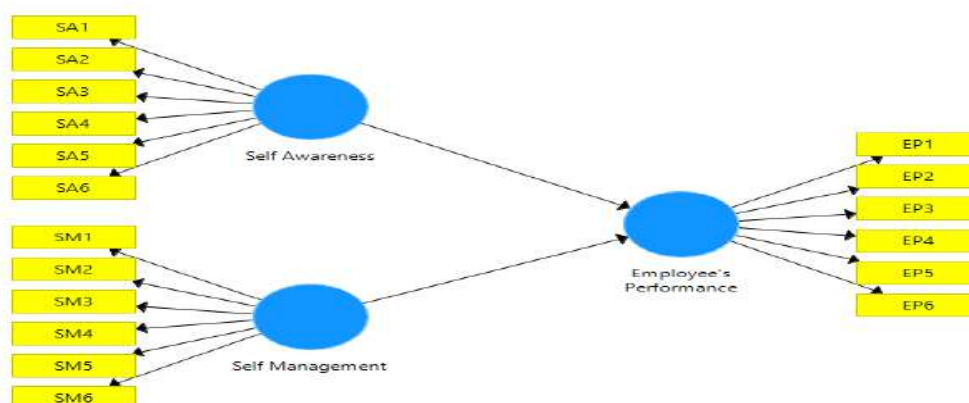
Initial Structural equation model for the study

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 4.1 showed the mean responses to each of the question for all the respondents, the median, the minimum, the maximum, and the standard deviation of the responses. Although, from the minimum and maximum values, there is no sign of outliers, but it is still necessary to state that the best measure of average for an ordinal response is median.

Table 4.1:   Summary Statistics of the Measurement Variables for the Study

S/N	Item	Measurement Factor	Freq	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1	SA1	Self-awareness positively impacts my performance in my role at the private hospital.	290	3.393	3	1.188
2	SA2	Understanding my strengths and weaknesses contributes to my effectiveness	290	4.131	5	1.106
3	SA3	Self-awareness helps me in managing stress and conflicts at work.	290	3.569	4	1.170
4	SA4	Self-awareness enhances my ability to adapt to changes and challenges in the workplace	290	3.648	4	1.136
5	SA5	Self-awareness is crucial in fostering effective communication and teamwork among colleagues	290	4.169	4	0.980
6	SA6	Self-awareness in improving my problem-solving skills in the workplace	290	4.490	5	0.990
7	SM1	I effectively manage my time and prioritize tasks in my role	290	4.245	5	0.964
8	SM2	I can control my emotions and reactions in challenging situations at work	290	4.117	4	1.064
9	SM3	I handle stress and pressure while performing my duties	290	4.207	5	1.016
10	SM4	I set and achieve goals related to my work responsibilities	290	4.314	5	1.004
11	SM5	Effective self-management contributes to my overall job satisfaction and performance	290	4.200	5	1.031
12	SM6	Self-management has impact on my ability to collaborate with colleagues effectively	290	4.255	5	0.956
13	EP1	I am pleased with the overall job performance in the workplace	290	3.824	4	1.044
14	EP2	Job performance meets the expectations and goals set	290	3.934	4	0.946
15	EP3	I feel motivated to perform well in my job and all task assign to me	290	3.986	4	0.921
16	EP4	I have the ability to effectively execute tasks and responsibilities assigned to me	290	3.990	4	0.892
17	EP5	My overall productivity and contribution has help improve the success of the organization	290	3.700	4	1.022
18	EP6	My feelings about my organization are very positive	290	3.866	4	0.964

Source: Researcher's Computation in Smart-PLS (2024)

In summary, table 1 shows that there are no missing values, all the minimum values were 1 (strongly disagree) and all the maximum values were 5 (strongly agree). All the means and medians of all the construct items were close and their rounded values are the same ranging from 3-5 (undecided, agreed and strongly agreed) with standard deviations all less than 1.2. These values did not indicate the presence of any outliers, showing that the data was good for further analyses.

Data Analysis

The assessment of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) results involves a two-step approach: (1) the evaluation of the measurement models and (2) the assessment of the structural model (Chin, 2010; Hair et al., 2016). The measurement model assessment involves the evaluation of construct measures' reliability and validity. This assessment draws on different measures, depending on whether a construct is measured reflectively or formatively.

Evaluation of Reflective Measurement Models

The assessment of reflective measurement models involves evaluating the measures' reliability (i.e., indicator reliability and internal consistency reliability), and the validity (i.e., convergent and discriminant validity).

Table 4. 2: Reliability of the Indicators

Item	Indicator	Loadings
SA2	Understanding my strengths and weaknesses contributes to my effectiveness	0.713
SA4	Self-awareness enhances my ability to adapt to changes and challenges in the workplace	0.713
SA5	Self-awareness is crucial in fostering effective communication and teamwork among colleagues	0.733
SA6	Self-awareness in improving my problem-solving skills in the workplace	0.746
SM1	I effectively manage my time and prioritize tasks in my role	0.720
SM2	I can control my emotions and reactions in challenging situations at work	0.738
SM3	I handle stress and pressure while performing my duties	0.785
SM4	I set and achieve goals related to my work responsibilities	0.806
SM5	Effective self-management contributes to my overall job satisfaction and performance	0.827
SM6	Self-management has impact on my ability to collaborate with colleagues effectively	0.791
EP1	I am pleased with the overall job performance in the workplace	0.784
EP2	Job performance meets the expectations and goals set	0.849
EP3	I feel motivated to perform well in my job and all task assign to me	0.864
EP4	I have the ability to effectively execute tasks and responsibilities assigned to me	0.713
EP6	My feelings about my organization are very positive	0.751

Source: Researcher's Computation in Smart-PLS (2024)

Table 4.3: Construct Reliability and Validity of the Indicators

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Employee's Performance	0.846	0.869	0.886	0.571
Self-Awareness	0.772	0.791	0.837	0.564
Self-Management	0.870	0.874	0.902	0.606

Source: Researcher's Computation in Smart-PLS (2024)

In summary, the composite reliability values, which depict the degree to which the construct indicators indicate the latent construct, exceeded the recommended value of 0.7 while average variance extracted, which reflects the overall amount of variance in the indicators accounted for by the latent construct, exceeded the recommended value of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2013). Also, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability values are also all above the recommended 0.7 (Chin et al, 2008). This is supported by the rho_A internal consistency reliability values that are also all above the recommended 0.7 (Ringle, et al, 2015).

Discriminant Validity
Discriminant validity is the extent to which a construct is empirically distinct from other constructs in the structural model. There are many traditional methods for discriminant validity assessment, such as cross loadings and the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), but researchers are advised to apply the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion (Henseler et al., 2014). This is because traditional methods fail to indicate a lack of discriminant validity, even when two constructs are perfectly correlated, rendering this criterion's use ineffective for empirical research. For this thesis, table 4.4 shows the HTMT criterion for all the latent constructs. The discriminant validity of the construct is valid if the upper bound of the 95% confidence interval of HTMT is lower than 0.9. From table 4.4, this condition is satisfied.

Discriminant Validity (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Criterion)

	Employee's Performance	Self-Awareness	Self-Management
Employee's Performance	0.755		
Self-Awareness	0.536	0.681	
Self-Management	0.594	0.776	0.779

Source: Researcher's computation in Smart-PLS (2024)
Structural Model
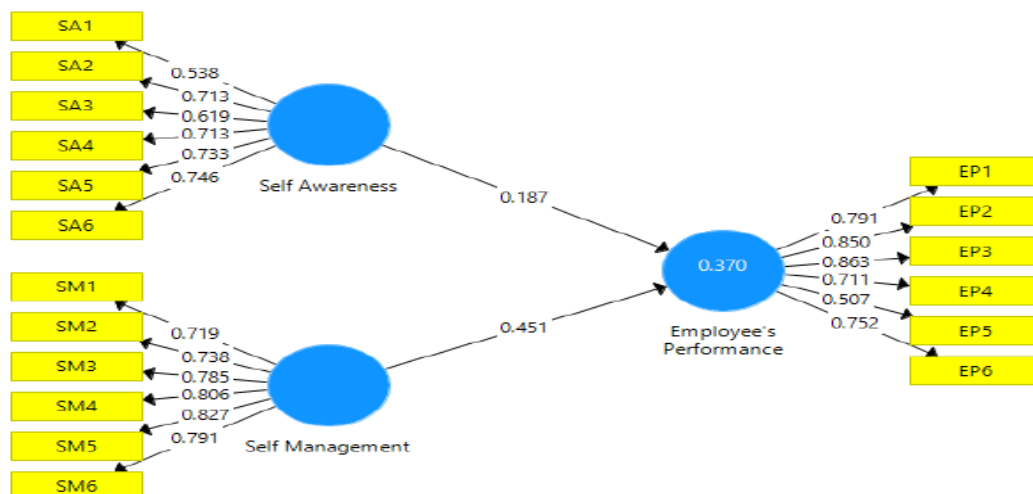
Researcher's Development in Smart-PLS (2024)

Test of Hypotheses
This section shows the path coefficients of the regression results using Smart-PLS 3.2. The path coefficient results are used for testing the hypotheses of the study.

Self-Awareness and Employee's Performance

Ho₁: Self-Awareness has no significant effect on employee's performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.

Path Coefficient Results Extract for Hypothesis One

Hypothesis	Coefficient	T- Stats	P-Values
Self-Awareness -> Employee's Performance	0.068	0.505	0.614

Source: Researcher's computation in Smart-PLS (2024)

The results in Table 4.6 show that the coefficient for the effect of Self-Awareness on Employee's Performance is 0.068 with a p-value of 0.614. The p-value, being greater than the acceptable 5% significance level, indicates that there is insufficient statistical evidence to reject null hypothesis one. Therefore, the study cannot adopt the corresponding alternative hypothesis. This suggests that there is a positive but insignificant effect of Self-Awareness on Employee's Performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.

Self-Management and Employee's Performance

Ho₂: Self-Management has no significant effect on employee's performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.

Path Coefficient Results Extract for Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis	Coefficient	T- Stats	P-Values
Social Awareness -> Employee's Performance	0.074	2.128	**0.034**

Source: Researcher's computation in Smart-PLS (2024)

The results in Table 4.7 reveal that the coefficient for the effect of Social Awareness on Employee's Performance is 0.074, with a corresponding t-statistic of 2.128 and a p-value of 0.034. Since the p-value is less than the acceptable 5% significance level, it provides sufficient statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis two. Thus, the study can adopt the corresponding alternative hypothesis. This indicates that there is a positive and significant effect of Social Awareness on Employee's Performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.

Predictive Power of the Model

Table 4.10: Predictive Power of Model Using R^2 and Q^2 Predict

	R^2	Q^2_predict
Employee's Performance	0.370	0.361

Source: Researcher's computation in Smart-PLS (2024)

Table 4.10 shows that the study has an r-square value of 0.370 for employee's performance which indicates that the independent variables used for the study account for about 37% of the variability in the dependent variable (employee's performance). Other factors not captured in the model may account for the remaining 63%.

Furthermore, the Q^2 values corroborate the assertions of the R^2 results with 36.1.9% predictive power for employees' performance. The Q^2 predict is another measure of predictive power of models that is very similar to the R^2 but more recent and gaining increasing popularity with PLS-SEM researchers who argue that the Q^2 may be a more efficient measure of predictive power (Ringle, et al, 2015). The Q^2 is usually computed in PLS-SEM analysis, particularly PLS-predict analysis in Smart-PLS tool as was used by this study.

Discussion of Findings

The first hypothesis evaluates whether Self-Awareness does not have a significant effect on employees' performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria. The coefficient for the effect of Self-Awareness on Employee's Performance is 0.068, with a p-value of 0.614. This p-value is greater than the acceptable 5% significance level, indicating insufficient statistical evidence to reject null hypothesis one. Therefore, the study cannot adopt the corresponding alternative hypothesis. The result contradicts the studies of Bethuel et al., (2022) investigated the effect of Self-awareness on the performance of employees of commercial banks in Kenya and the analysis results at 0.05 level of significance showed that self-awareness has a statistically significant influence on the performance of employees of commercial banks in Kenya.

The findings from the second hypothesis revealed that the coefficient for the effect of Social Awareness on Employee's Performance is 0.074, with a corresponding t-statistic of 2.128 and a p-value of 0.034. Since the p-value is less than the acceptable 5% significance level, there is sufficient statistical evidence to reject null hypothesis two. Hence, the study can adopt the corresponding alternative hypothesis. The findings from this study is consistent with that of Olusegun et al., (2022) examined the interaction between emotional intelligence and employee performance in selected private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The broad objective of this study was to assess the effect emotional intelligence on employees' performance of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria. The study has been successful in accomplishing its two research objectives and has been able to make contributions to the literature of emotional intelligence. Thus, based on the findings of the study the following conclusions were drawn:

The study found a positive but insignificant effect of Self-Awareness on Employee's Performance in private hospitals in North Central Nigeria. Although self-awareness showed a positive relationship with employee performance, the statistical analysis did not support its significance. This suggests that while self-awareness may contribute positively to employee performance, its impact may not be statistically significant in the context of private hospitals in North Central Nigeria.

The study revealed a significant positive effect of Self-Management on Employee's Performance in private hospitals in North Central Nigeria. Employees who effectively manage their social interactions and relationships demonstrate better performance. This underscores the importance of social management skills in enhancing employee performance within the healthcare setting.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:
   a. Although self-awareness did not show a statistically significant impact on employee performance, it remains a valuable trait for healthcare professionals. Hospitals should implement training programs and workshops aimed at enhancing self-awareness among employees. These programs can include self-assessment tools, mindfulness training, and emotional intelligence workshops to help employees better understand their strengths, weaknesses, and emotional states.
   b. Hospitals should invest in programs and interventions designed to improve self management skills among employees. Such programs which may include time management workshops or seminars, provide stress management resources and support services, encourage employees to set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals and develop action plans to achieve them.

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EFFECT OF ENTREPRENEURIAL MARKETING ON THE PERFORMANCE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (SMES) IN NORTH-CENTRAL, NIGERIA

[1]BOB-ALLI, Mary Majiyebo
[1]Department of Business Administration, Bingham University Karu-Nigeria
email: mary.boballi@binghamuni.edu.ng

Abstract

The Small and Medium Enterprise (SMEs) plays a pivotal role in an economy as major economic drivers. Despite their significant contributions, SMEs continue to face constraints in the business terrain, which remains a concern for researchers and practitioners. This study examined the effect of entrepreneurial marketing on the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in North-Central Nigeria using a survey research design. Data were collected from owner/managers of SMEs via a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The population comprised all 218,441 SMEs in the region, as reported by SMEDAN and NBS (2021). Using Yamane's (1967) formula, a sample size of 399 was determined, and 10% was added to account for non-respondents, resulting in 439 participants. Purposive sampling was employed, and the data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The study found that both innovativeness and customer intensity have significant and positive effects on SMEs' performance. Based on these findings, it is recommended that SMEs foster a culture of innovation by investing in employee training and development, and accessing innovation funding. Additionally, SMEs should enhance customer engagement by conducting market research and implementing robust customer relationship management systems to tailor their products and services to customer needs, thereby building strong, loyal customer bases.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurial Marketing. Innovativeness, Customer Intensity, SMEs Performance*

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial marketing (EM) has gained global recognition as a pivotal strategy for enhancing the performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs). Unlike traditional marketing, EM involves innovative, risk-oriented, and opportunity-driven approaches that adapt to the dynamic market environment (Hisrich & Ramadani, 2018). Across the globe, SMEs adopting EM practices have demonstrated superior adaptability and resilience, fostering sustainable growth even in volatile economic climates. For instance, studies have shown that SMEs in developed economies like the United States and the United Kingdom have significantly benefitted from integrating EM principles, resulting in increased market penetration, customer loyalty, and revenue growth (Fillis, 2010). The global shift towards EM underscores its critical role in driving SME performance and competitiveness in diverse economic settings.

In the context of North-Central Nigeria, the application of entrepreneurial marketing is particularly significant due to the region's unique economic landscape. SMEs in this area, which play a crucial role in local economic development and employment generation, face numerous challenges, including limited access to finance, infrastructural inadequacies, and intense market competition (Olannye & Edward, 2016). By embracing EM, these enterprises can mitigate such challenges and leverage opportunities for growth. Empirical evidence suggests that North-Central Nigerian SMEs that implement EM strategies are better positioned to enhance their market reach, build robust customer relationships, and improve overall business performance (Agwu & Emeti, 2014). Consequently, fostering the adoption of entrepreneurial marketing within this region is essential for the sustained development and competitiveness of its SMEs.

Entrepreneurial marketing (EM) characterized by innovative, risk-taking, and proactive approaches to market activities, diverges from traditional marketing practices by emphasizing flexibility and customer engagement (Hills & Hultman, 2011). In the North-Central region of Nigeria, SMEs form a substantial part of the economy, providing employment and fostering economic growth. However, these enterprises often face significant challenges such as limited access to capital, infrastructural deficits, and competitive pressures (Olannye & Edward, 2016). Integrating EM practices can potentially address these challenges by enhancing market reach, improving customer relationships, and driving overall business performance.

Empirical studies indicate a positive correlation between the adoption of entrepreneurial marketing and improved business outcomes for SMEs. For instance, Jones and Rowley (2011) found that SMEs employing EM strategies experienced higher growth rates and increased market share compared to those using conventional marketing approaches. In the context of North-Central Nigeria, this relationship is particularly pertinent due to the dynamic and often volatile market conditions. By leveraging EM principles, SMEs in this region can better navigate the uncertainties of the business environment, capitalize on emerging opportunities, and sustain competitive advantages (Gunday et al., 2011).

The present state of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria is characterized by significant challenges including limited access to financing, inadequate infrastructure, and intense market competition, which impede their growth and performance (Olannye & Edward, 2016). Despite these hurdles, many SMEs have not fully embraced entrepreneurial marketing (EM) practices, which are crucial for fostering innovation, adaptability, and proactive market engagement. The desired state is one where SMEs in this region adopt and effectively implement EM strategies, leading to enhanced market reach, stronger customer relationships, and improved overall business performance.

The urgency for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to survive, grow, and compete in an increasingly dynamic and volatile environment has never been more pronounced. SMEs in Nigeria, which contribute about 55% to the nation's GDP and are the largest job creators, are pivotal economic drivers (Nwankwo & Kanyangale, 2020; Effiom & Edet, 2018; Kesinro et al., 2016; Eniola, 2014). Despite their significant contributions and role as key innovators, these enterprises face substantial challenges, including a lack of knowledge, finance, time, and other essential resources. This has led to an exploration of the interrelationship between marketing and entrepreneurship, with research suggesting that entrepreneurial marketing—characterized by innovative, proactive, and risk-taking approaches—can be particularly effective for resource-constrained SMEs (Mugambi & Karugu, 2017). Entrepreneurial marketing offers vital tools for market engagement on a constrained budget, which is crucial for micro and small-sized entrepreneurs.

However, there is a noticeable gap in empirical research focusing on the impact of entrepreneurial marketing within specific regional contexts, such as North-Central Nigeria, where SMEs face distinct challenges like limited access to finance, infrastructural deficiencies, and a volatile market environment (Adeoye & Elegunde, 2012). Existing literature often explores entrepreneurial marketing in broad, global contexts, overlooking critical regional variations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Morrish et al. 2010). Addressing this gap is essential for developing targeted strategies to support SME growth and sustainability in North-Central Nigeria. This study aims to examine the specific effects of entrepreneurial marketing on SME performance in the region, providing empirical evidence on how dimensions such as innovation orientation, proactiveness, customer intensity, resource leveraging, and calculated risk-taking correlate with business performance indicators like profitability, market share, and growth.

The following null hypotheses were tested by study:
H_{01}: Innovativeness has no significant effect on the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in North-Central, Nigeria
H_{02}: Customer intensity has no significant effect on the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in North-Central, Nigeria

LITERATURE REVIEW
Entrepreneurial Marketing
Entrepreneurial marketing is a dynamic and strategic approach to business that revolves around the identification, creation, and exploitation of opportunities within the marketplace (Scarborough & Cornwall, 2015). Hisrich and Ramadani (2017) identify seven key dimensions of entrepreneurial marketing: calculated risk-taking, proactiveness, customer intensity, opportunity focus, innovativeness, resource leveraging, and value creation. This multifaceted process integrates innovative product development, the cultivation of unique value propositions, and the implementation of effective marketing strategies. Leveraging

entrepreneurial skills and mindset to discern and capitalize on market gaps is essential, often involving agile and disruptive approaches to establish and nurture sustainable ventures, as highlighted by Kuratko et al. (2020).

The proactive pursuit of opportunities is a core tenet of entrepreneurial marketing, requiring businesses to continuously adapt to changing market conditions and strategically allocate resources to achieve a competitive advantage and foster long-term growth (Hindle, 2013). This approach represents a fusion of the entrepreneurial mindset and strategic marketing principles, emphasizing risk-taking, creativity, and opportunity recognition to generate value for both customers and stakeholders (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). Schindehutte and LaForge (2022) further describe entrepreneurial marketing as the proactive identification and exploitation of opportunities to acquire and retain profitable customers through innovative approaches to risk management, resource leveraging, and value creation. By managing risks creatively and using resources efficiently, businesses can maximize value and ensure long-term profitability in a competitive marketplace.

Innovativeness

Innovativeness can be defined as the capacity or inclination to introduce novel and valuable ideas, products, processes, or methods within an organization or industry (Rogers, 2013). It encompasses the ability to think creatively, challenge conventional wisdom, and bring about meaningful change through the introduction of new and improved solutions. This proactive stance towards change is crucial for fostering positive transformations within a specific context, as articulated by Khatun (2021). By continuously pursuing innovative solutions that deviate from established norms and practices, organizations can stay ahead of the curve and maintain their competitive edge.

Further expanding on this concept, innovativeness involves the intrinsic inclination of both individuals and organizations to defy conventional thinking, engage in experimental approaches, and willingly embrace risks to propel progress and attain significant outcomes (Modrzejewska, 2020). Brown and Anthony (2011) augment this understanding by framing innovativeness as a continuous exploration, adaptation, and integration of new ideas, technologies, or methodologies. By fostering an environment that encourages experimentation and embraces the potential for failure as a pathway to success, organizations can drive substantial progress and achieve meaningful results.

Customer Intensity

Customer intensity refers to the assessment of the long-term significance of customer connections for an organization (Reinartz & Kumar, 2013). It embodies a corporate culture that highly prioritizes customer satisfaction and loyalty (Reichheld & Sasser, 2020). This process entails cultivating a customer-centric mentality among employees at every level of the company, where everyone recognizes the importance of meeting and exceeding customer expectations to achieve enduring commercial success. Strategic management of customer relationships aims to optimize their long-term value, employing methodologies and procedures for recognizing, acquiring, maintaining, and expanding profitable customer categories (Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

Customer intensity also involves leveraging customer data and insights to personalize interactions and enhance customer experiences. This includes the deliberate segmentation of the market into distinct customer groups and targeting these segments with customized products, services, and marketing initiatives (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021). Understanding the diverse needs, preferences, and behaviors of different client segments enables the creation of offerings that align with their specific requirements, thereby optimizing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, customer intensity involves the proactive effort of soliciting and addressing customer feedback to improve goods, services, and processes. Methods for gathering consumer insights such as surveys, feedback forms, social media monitoring, and customer service channels are integral to integrating customer input into decision-making and continuous improvement efforts (Fader & Hardie, 2013).

SMEs Performance

Performance, as defined by Lebans and Euske (2002), is the assessment of financial and non-financial gains that determine the level of achievement relative to predetermined goals and actual results. Similarly, Fazlollahi and Franke (2018) describe firm performance as the tangible outputs or outcomes measured against envisioned outputs, such as objectives and goals. This concept is particularly crucial for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), which play a pivotal role in the global economy. SME performance is inherently tied to achieving business objectives like profitability, growth, and sustainability, which are vital for their resilience amid economic challenges (Park & Byun, 2022).

Measuring SME performance requires a comprehensive view that includes various key performance indicators (KPIs) spanning financial metrics, operational efficiency, and market competitiveness (Polishchuk & Ivashchenko, 2019). These indicators provide insights into the overall health and operational effectiveness of SMEs. Specific factors such as sales revenue, return on investment, and customer satisfaction are critical metrics for evaluating SME success in a competitive landscape (Merritt & Zhao, 2020). These metrics highlight the importance of building strong customer relationships and delivering high-quality products or services, which are integral to sustaining SME success and fostering long-term growth.

Empirical Review
Innovativeness and SMEs Performance

Anwar (2018) examined the impact of business innovation on the performance of SMEs, focusing on the manufacturing sector. Engaging structured questionnaires and a sample of 303 manufacturing SMEs, the study tapped into the potential of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using AMOS.21. The outcomes unfurled a significant positive relationship between business innovativeness, competitive advantage, and SME performance. The study also illuminated the mediating role of competitive advantage in the business innovation-SME performance nexus. However, the distribution of 600 questionnaires to a sample of 303 firms remains inadequately explained, casting shadows on the study's representativeness.

Kiveu et al. (2019) ventured into the realm of innovativeness and its effect on firm competitiveness within Nairobi County's manufacturing SMEs. Employing a cross-sectional survey strategy, the study collected data over a three-year period from 2012 to 2014. With a target population of 987 registered manufacturing SMEs, the research selected a sample of 284 enterprises. By administering questionnaires to owner-managers, the study probed the intricate dynamics of innovation and competitiveness. However, the study's opacity regarding the sample size derivation raises concerns about the representativeness of the findings.

Urbancová (2013) embarked on an inquiry into the role of innovativeness in the quest for competitiveness in the Czech Republic. By tapping into primary data garnered through a questionnaire survey of 109 organizations, the study followed the path of random quota sampling. Organizational groups, structured along sector and size lines to mirror the Czech Republic's organizational landscape, underwent analysis. The outcomes, presented through tables and simple percentages, underscored the pivotal role of innovativeness as a determinant of competitiveness among firms. However, this study was carried out in a different context in Czech Republic the study findings may not apply to SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

Customer Intensity and SMEs Performance

Shuremo et al (2021) investigated whether entrepreneurial marketing can affect the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises operating in Ethiopia, specifically in the city of Jimma. A purposive sampling technique was employed to gather data from 100 business owners that have been on market for more than 7 years. The data were analysed using Minitab and SPSS statistical software packages. The study showed that some elements of entrepreneurial marketing indeed affect the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises. Innovation orientation and customer intensity have a positive relationship with the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises and are statistically significant, while risk-taking orientation has a negative relationship and is statistically significant. It is therefore recommended that business owners apply the concept of entrepreneurial marketing to leverage their limited resources to cope with competitors and

maintain the sustainability of their business. However, this study was carried out in a different context in Khartoum-Sudan the study findings may not apply to SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

Fegada and Veres (2024) investigated the significant relationship between customer intensity and firm performance in SMEs operating in Khartoum, Sudan, using technological capabilities as a moderating variable, grounded in the resource-based view. The study hypothesized that customer intensity significantly impacts firm performance dimensions (profitability, sustainability, and customer satisfaction) and that technological capabilities positively moderate this relationship. Employing a quantitative approach consistent with positivism philosophy and a deductive theory development approach, the study analyzed 255 responses from SMEs in Khartoum. Using principal component analysis (PCA), correlation, rotation matrix, and structural equation modeling (SEM) path analysis, the study found that customer intensity positively affects profitability ($p = 0.000$) and customer satisfaction ($p = 0.001$), but negatively affects sustainability ($p = 0.216$). Additionally, technological capabilities positively moderate the relationship between customer intensity and profitability ($p = 0.000$), sustainability ($p = 0.007$), and customer satisfaction ($p = 0.000$). However, the results may not be applicable to SMEs in North-Central Nigeria due to contextual differences.

Anand, et al (2011) posited that in many services, the quality or value provided by the service increases with the time the service provider spends with the customer. However, longer service times also result in longer waits for customers. We term such services, in which the interaction between quality and speed is critical, as customer-intensive services. In a queueing framework, we parameterize the degree of customer intensity of the service. The service speed chosen by the service provider affects the quality of the service through its customer intensity. Customers queue for the service based on service quality, delay costs, and price. The study examined how a service provider facing such customers makes the optimal quality--speed trade-off. The study results demonstrate that the customer intensity of the service is a critical driver of equilibrium price, service speed, demand, congestion in queues, and service provider revenues. Customer intensity leads to outcomes very different from those of traditional models of service rate competition. However, this study was carried out in a different context the study findings may not apply to SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework
Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV), popularized by Jay Barney in 1991, emphasizes the importance of firm-specific resources and capabilities in achieving sustainable competitive advantage. Originating from Penrose's work, RBV explains the performance rate of firms by clarifying the causal relationships among firm resources, production capability, and performance, focusing on the efficient and innovative use of resources. Penrose highlighted that bundles of productive resources controlled by firms could significantly vary, making firms fundamentally heterogeneous even within the same industry. Wernerfelt further developed this perspective by analyzing how firms diversify based on their resources, considering resources and products as two sides of the same coin. The knowledge-based literature has also contributed to RBV by viewing knowledge as the most complex organizational resource. Empirical studies demonstrate that firms with valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources tend to outperform competitors, making RBV highly influential in understanding how SMEs can leverage their unique resources for enhanced performance and competitive edge.

The RBV framework is particularly relevant for SMEs in North Central Nigeria, where leveraging unique internal resources is crucial due to limited access to external capital and infrastructure. By focusing on their specialized knowledge, skills, technology, and networks, SMEs can differentiate themselves from competitors and create value that is difficult to replicate. Enhancing core competencies and building capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) can lead to sustainable competitive advantage. For instance, investing in employee training, adopting new technologies, and cultivating strong relationships with local suppliers and customers can provide a robust foundation for success. By aligning strategic initiatives with resource strengths, SMEs can improve operational efficiency,

adapt to market changes, and pursue growth opportunities confidently, ultimately contributing to regional economic development.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey research design utilizing a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire to collect data from owner/managers of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria. The study population comprise all the SMEs in North-Central, Nigeria. According to SMEDAN and NBS (2021) report, there are about 218,441 small and medium enterprises in north-central Nigeria. The Yamane (1967) formula was used to determine the study sample size of 399. 10% was added as advice by Singh and Masuku (2014) to account for those who cannot be contacted. Thus, the study sample is 439. The sampling technique employed for the research is purposive sampling. The study sample size was determined according to respective population size in of the states within the north central zone and the F.C.T. as shown in table1 below:

Table 1: Sample of Selected SMEs (owners/managers) according to state

S/N	State	Number of SMEs	Sample size
1	Kwara	42,561	42,561*439/218,441= 86
2	Kogi	22,400	22,400*439/218,441= 45
3	Benue	25,909	25,909*439/218,441= 52
4	Federal Capital Territory (FCT)	38,003	38,003*439/218,441= 76
5	Niger	36,084	36,084*439/218,441= 73
6	Plateau	32,028	32,028*439/218,441= 64
7	Nasarawa	21,456	21,456*439/218,441= 43
8	**Total**	218,441	439

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Data were coded and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess both the measurement and structural models. The model of study is specified below: -
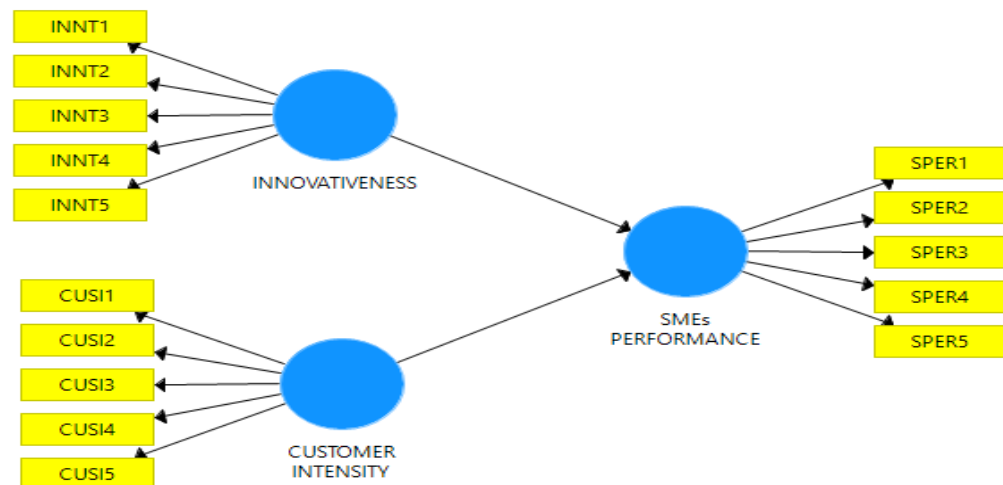

Figure 1: Study Model

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The study distributed 439 copies of questionnaire to the selected owner/managers of SMEs in the north central zone, with 407 were correctly filled and returned, yielding a response rate of 93%. To ensure data integrity, a preliminary assessment was conducted to detect potential issues such as missing values, outliers, or biased responses. The analysis confirmed the absence of missing data, outliers, or biased responses, ensuring the reliability of the collected information.

The Measurement Model

Evaluating the outer loadings of study items is essential in assessing a measurement model, as these loadings indicate the strength of the relationship between each item and its corresponding construct. According to Hair et al. (2019), loadings exceeding 0.70 are generally considered acceptable, as they demonstrate that over

50% of the variance in the indicator is explained by the construct. This benchmark is critical because it ensures that the construct substantially contributes to the variation in the indicator, leading to a reliable measurement of the items. Loadings above this threshold suggest a robust connection between the items and their underlying constructs, thereby enhancing confidence in the measurement model's accuracy and validity.
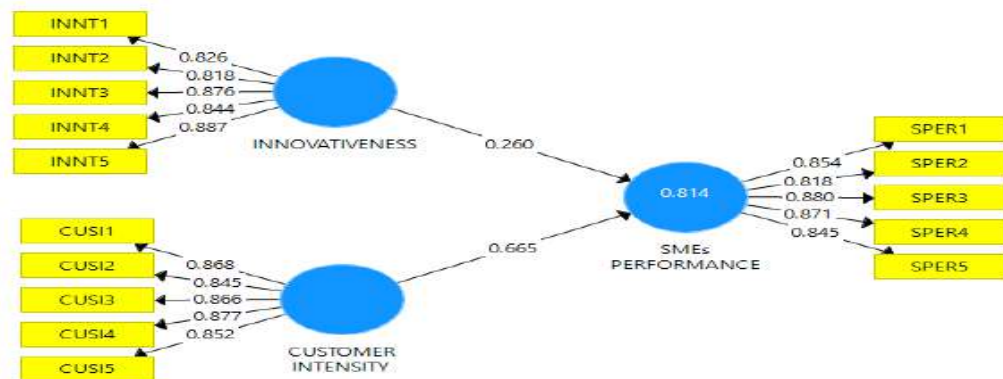

Figure 2: Indicator outer loading

Table 2; Reliability of the Study Scale

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CUSTOMER INTENSITY	0.913	0.913	0.935	0.742
INNOVATIVENESS	0.904	0.906	0.929	0.723
SMEs PERFORMANCE	0.907	0.908	0.931	0.729

Source: Smart PLS Output 2024

The study evaluated internal consistency using composite reliability measures, all of which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, as shown in Table 2, confirming strong consistency within the constructs. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha values surpassed the minimum accepted criterion of 0.70, as advocated by Hair et al. (2017), further reinforcing the robustness of the study's measures' reliability. Convergent validity was assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE), with all variables displaying values higher than 0.50. This indicates that each construct accounted for at least 50% of the variance in the study items, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity.

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	CUSTOMER INTENSITY	INNOVATIVENESS	SMEs PERFORMANCE
CUSTOMER INTENSITY			
INNOVATIVENESS	0.456		
SMEs PERFORMANCE	0.612	0.583	

Source: Smart PLS Output 2024

The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) table presents the correlations between different constructs to assess discriminant validity. The HTMT value between Customer Intensity and Innovativeness is 0.456, indicating a moderate correlation. The HTMT value between Customer Intensity and SMEs Performance is 0.612, suggesting a stronger correlation compared to Innovativeness. Lastly, the HTMT value between Innovativeness and SMEs Performance is 0.583, showing a moderate correlation. All these values being below 0.85 suggest that the constructs are distinct from each other, thus confirming satisfactory discriminant validity.

The Structural Model
In assessing the structural model, the standard criteria considered included the path coefficient, t-values, p-values, and the coefficient of determination (R^2). The bootstrapping procedure was conducted using 5000 resamples.
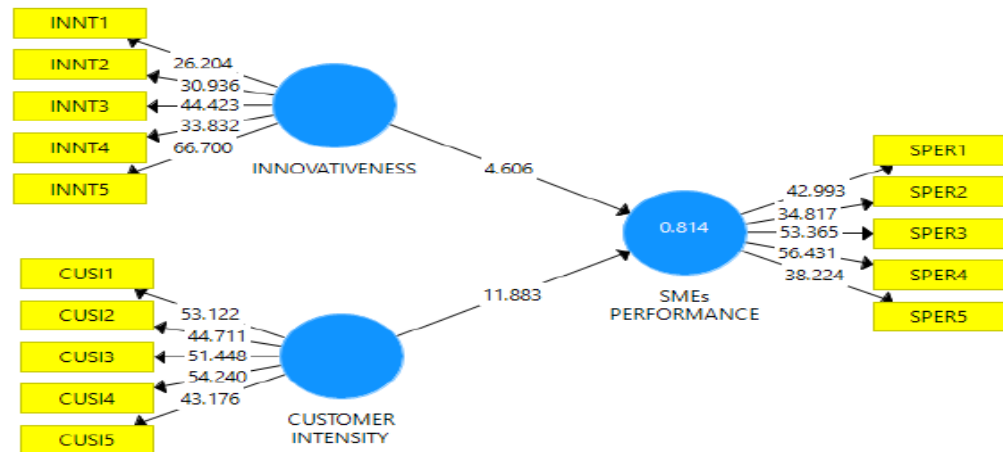

Figure 3: Path Coefficient of the regression model

Table 4: Path Coefficients

	Path Coefficients **(Beta)	T -values	P- Values	Decision
CUSTOMER INTENSITY -> SMEs PERFORMANCE	0.665	11.883	0.000	Rejected
INNOVATIVENESS -> SMEs PERFORMANCE	0.259	4.606	0.000	Rejected

Source: Smart PLS Output 2024
Table 4 presents the path coefficients, T-values, and P-values for the relationships between innovativeness, customer intensity, and SMEs performance.

Test of Hypotheses
Table 4 presents the path coefficients, t-values, and p-values for the relationships between customer intensity, innovativeness, and SMEs' performance. The path coefficient for the relationship between innovativeness and SMEs' performance is 0.259, with a t-value of 4.606 and a p-value of 0.000. These results show a moderate and statistically significant positive effect of innovativeness on SMEs' performance, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H01) that innovativeness has no significant effect on the performance of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria. This indicates that higher levels of innovativeness significantly contribute to better performance among SMEs in the region. Overall, both customer intensity and innovativeness are important factors positively influencing the performance of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria.

Similarly, the path coefficient for the relationship between customer intensity and SMEs' performance is 0.665, with a t-value of 11.883 and a p-value of 0.000. These values indicate a strong and statistically significant positive effect of customer intensity on SMEs' performance, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H02) that customer intensity has no significant effect on the performance of SMEs in North-Central Nigeria. This suggests that higher customer intensity significantly enhances the performance of SMEs in this region.

Discussion of Findings
A study on the effect of entrepreneurial marketing on the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in North-Central Nigeria found a positive and significant effect of innovativeness on SMEs' performance in the region. This result aligns with the findings of Anwar (2018) and Urbancová (2013), who

also reported that innovativeness is a crucial driver of improved performance in SMEs. These consistent findings suggest that the ability to introduce new ideas, products, or processes can significantly enhance the competitive edge and operational success of SMEs. In North-Central Nigeria, where market conditions may be challenging, innovativeness provides SMEs with the tools to adapt and thrive, underscoring the importance of fostering a culture of creativity and innovation within these enterprises.

The study also identified a positive and significant effect of customer intensity on SMEs' performance in North Central-Nigeria. This finding is in line with the research conducted by Fegada and Veres (2024) and Shuremo et al. (2021), which highlighted the critical role of customer-focused strategies in driving business success. High customer intensity, which involves deeply understanding and responding to customer needs and preferences, appears to be a significant performance enhancer for SMEs in North Central Nigeria. This suggests that SMEs that prioritize customer relationships and tailor their marketing efforts to meet customer demands are likely to achieve better performance outcomes. The alignment with previous studies emphasizes the universal importance of customer orientation in the SME sector, particularly in regions where direct customer engagement and personalized service can differentiate businesses in competitive markets.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that entrepreneurial marketing practices, specifically innovativeness and customer intensity, have a significant and positive impact on the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in North-Central Nigeria. Innovativeness enables SMEs to enhance their competitive edge and adapt to market challenges by introducing new products, services, and processes. Similarly, customer intensity, which emphasizes a strong focus on understanding and meeting customer needs, significantly boosts SMEs' performance by fostering customer loyalty and satisfaction. These findings underscore the critical role of both innovation and customer-oriented strategies in driving the success and sustainability of SMEs in the region. Based on the study findings, it is recommended:

i. That SMEs in North-Central Nigeria invest in fostering a culture of innovation within their organizations. This can be achieved by encouraging creative thinking, providing training and development opportunities for employees, and allocating resources towards research and development. Business support organizations should also facilitate access to innovation funding and offer programs that help SMEs develop and implement innovative ideas. By prioritizing innovation, SMEs can enhance their adaptability, improve their market position, and ensure long-term growth and success.

ii. Additionally, SMEs should enhance their customer intensity by adopting strategies that prioritize customer engagement and satisfaction. This includes conducting regular market research to understand customer needs, preferences, and feedback, and utilizing this information to tailor products and services accordingly. Implementing robust customer relationship management (CRM) systems can also help SMEs track customer interactions and improve service delivery. By focusing on customer-centric marketing approaches, SMEs in North-Central Nigeria can build strong, loyal customer bases, which are essential for achieving sustained business performance and competitive advantage.

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