Entrepreneurial Networking and Business Growth of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises Operating in Ogoja, Nigeria

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Abstract

The primary goal of the study was to investigate the effect of entrepreneurial networking on the growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja. More specifically, the study was interested in assessing the effect of networking capability, network ties and network diversity on business growth of small and medium scale enterprises in the study area. The research adopted the descriptive survey research methodology. The target population for the research comprised of 789 registered SMEs operating in Ogoja in retail trade, services, agro based enterprises and small-scale manufacturing enterprises. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan sample size formula, the number of respondents was established at 259. A total of 259 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents. However, 218 were valid and were therefore used for the analyses. The study employed the stratified random sampling technique. Primary data for the study was obtained through a structured questionnaire which had been developed using the five-point Likert scale. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis with the aid of SPSS version 27. The results showed that networking capability has a positive and statistically significant effect on SME growth in the study area. It was further observed that network ties have a positive and significant effect on SME growth. Also, network diversity has been found to positively and significantly impact on SME growth. The conclusions drawn by this study suggest that entrepreneurial networking is critical in driving SMEs in the study area due to its ability to connect SME owners to customers, referrals, sources of information and business opportunities.

Based on the results and conclusions, SME owners need to work towards improving their networking capabilities and building strong and diverse networks with customers, suppliers, business associations, financial institutions, and other entrepreneurs.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurial networking; Networking capability; Network ties; Network diversity; SME business growth; Small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs)*

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Networks have been a rising area of interest among scholars investigating entrepreneurship in small businesses, especially in environments where firms conduct operations with restricted finance, lack institutional support, face uncertainties, and operate in highly competitive environments. Generally speaking, entrepreneurial networking is the phenomenon through which the entrepreneur builds, maintains, and utilizes relationships with persons, groups, and institutions that assist in conducting business and ensuring its success (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021). The connections may include customers, suppliers, other entrepreneurs, financial institutions, cooperative societies, trade unions, governmental bodies, family connections, and business networks online (Karami et al., 2023). In the past, it was seen mostly as social relations but it has recently been widely recognized as the strategic asset that enables SMEs to acquire knowledge, opportunities, markets, innovations, and resources (Marcano Nieves et al., 2025). On the other hand, business growth is associated with increasing sales revenue, growing profit, acquiring and retaining customers, expanding into new markets, introducing innovations, employing more people, and sustainable growth (Abidin et al., 2023). SME growth is not just about financial investment or efforts from the owner. Relationships play an important role here. The owner with access to reliable suppliers, loyal clients, support from peers, market knowledge, and business connections has a better chance to succeed than someone operating alone. That is why, recent research increasingly focuses on the relationship between business networking and business growth, competitiveness, and sustainability of SMEs (Achama & Wegwu, 2023; Aladejebi, 2020; Sendawula et al., 2023). The existing body of literature suggests that networking influences entrepreneurship through some channels. The first channel discussed is the concept of networking capabilities. Networking capabilities refer to the capacity of an entrepreneur to identify useful contacts, build relationships, maintain communications, and leverage them for business gain. As observed by Karami et al., networking capabilities enable better SME performance when used for identifying opportunities and strengthening business-to-business relations. Along similar lines, Aldibiki and El Ebrashi (2023) demonstrated how networks and capabilities help in the growth of SMEs. In addition, Alkhalailah et al. (2026) highlighted the role of networking capabilities in facilitating entrepreneurial orientation and export performance. Even if most SMEs in Ogoja are not into exports, the same theory holds true. Entrepreneurs who have the ability to leverage networking effectively tend to have easy access to various resources such as customers, suppliers, financing, information, and even opportunities compared to poor or inefficient networks. The quality of the business relationship formed is another significant aspect of entrepreneurship networking. The strong business relationship is normally formed by building trust, dependability, continuous interaction, and support between parties. When this relationship is developed in small businesses, the benefits that follow include customer referrals, supplier credit, market intelligence, and help during tough times. According to Yang et al. (2022), network relations affect the innovations in the business models of SMEs and also their growth. The relation of entrepreneurial networking relations with SME growth was shown by Wanambisi et al. (2023). Networking can be used to facilitate entrepreneurial marketing by word-of-mouth, as indicated by Robledo et al. (2023). This is especially the case with SMEs in Ogoja. Digital and social media networking have also transformed the way SMEs develop business relationships in recent years. Social media networks including WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and business-related social media sites enable entrepreneurs to converse with their customers, advertise their products, get orders, and keep their profile high even outside of their geographical boundaries. According to Tiwasing (2021), social media business networks impact SME performance; however, according to Karinki et al. (2020), social media can also reinforce the link between entrepreneurial networking and SME performance. Furthermore, Norvadewi & Parlina (2025) linked entrepreneurial networking and digital marketing to MSME performance. Digital networking might be highly relevant for SMEs in Ogoja, since digital platforms can help businesses engage with customers from neighboring towns, stay in touch with them regularly, and promote their products and services relatively inexpensively. Nonetheless, networking among entrepreneurs may not always be helpful. Its impact would depend on the nature and value of the networks created by the entrepreneurs. A wide array of networks may fail to contribute to business growth because the networks may not offer necessary information, market access, resources, referral and support. According to Mlotshwa and Msimango-Galawe (2020), there is need to take care of the situation where networking tends to gain importance even though the activities do not deliver expected performances. In other words, the success of SMEs not only relies on networking but also on the nature of networks created and how the networks are being utilized. Under such a context, this research looks at the impact of entrepreneurial networking on the business growth of SMEs in Ogoja.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Recently, entrepreneurial networking has gained popularity as a major determinant of small and medium scale business success. Networking is seen to help in building useful connections, reaching out to customers and suppliers, obtaining referrals, exchanging business information and exploring useful business opportunities for improving business growth, especially where there is limited access to finances, market information, institutions, and markets (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021; Aladejebi, 2020; Karami et al., 2023; Sendawula et al., 2023). While it is appreciated that entrepreneurial networking has a positive role in supporting small and medium-scale business operations, most businesses continue to lack ways of harnessing the potential of entrepreneurial networking to achieve growth in terms of increased sales, profits, number of customers, market and overall business sustainability. Many small and medium scale businesses in Ogoja have continued to experience challenges associated with turning networking efforts into growth of the businesses. This is despite the fact that most of the business people claim that they are able to reach out to customers, suppliers, fellow entrepreneurs, market associations, cooperative members, and others through business contacts. A pilot survey carried out by the researcher on selected small and medium scale business owners in Ogoja showed that while the selected respondents claimed that they were able to make contact with customers, suppliers, other entrepreneurs, market associations, cooperatives and other relevant parties through business contacts, there were challenges of translating the contacts into business growth. Many business owners mentioned that the growth in their businesses depended more on their personal efforts, family supports and daily contacts with customers than the contacts made through entrepreneurship networking. Moreover, the pilot results indicated that networking capacity is a skill which is lacking in some SME owners. Many entrepreneurs are known to have social contacts in their environment, but they lack the capacity to discover, cultivate, communicate effectively with, and exploit contacts to benefit themselves. The problem with such an approach to networking is the fact that networking becomes more effective if entrepreneurs learn how to develop, manage, and exploit networking for their benefits (Aldibiki & El Ebrashi, 2023; Karami et al., 2023; Marcano Nieves et al., 2025). Therefore, where entrepreneurs lack networking capacity, many contacts would be in place without SME owners accessing new customers, suppliers, information, finance, innovation opportunities, or growth. Also, the pilot results indicated that the network ties of some SMEs in Ogoja were not strong enough to yield any advantage. Entrepreneurs might have established informal connections, but they are not as robust as required by entrepreneurs to give them a hand through trust, referrals, regular assistance, credit from suppliers, sound advice, and loyalty from customers. There was evidence to suggest that the business contacts made by some entrepreneurs did not help them to get any assistance when they had low sales, insufficient inventories, or uncertain markets. Consequently, this situation could hinder the growth of businesses since network ties can foster business model innovations, word-of-mouth promotion, referrals, and growth of enterprises (Robledo et al., 2023; Wanambisi et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022). Hence, SME owners may be socially connected but economically unsupported. In addition, it was found that network diversity is another problem. Some of the SME owners seem to rely heavily on a very limited network of either customers, family members, friends, or suppliers, as opposed to creating more expansive business networks that include financial institutions, business organizations, co-operatives, government institutions, digital technology, as well as entrepreneurs from other industries. In doing so, they might deprive themselves of many opportunities. Several authors noted the positive effects that the diversity of business networks has on knowledge creation, strategy development, competitiveness, and performance of SMEs (Clifton et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2024; Leick & Gretzinger, 2020; Mulyana & Wasitowati, 2021). For that reason, if an SME's network is very limited, it will be hard for it to operate beyond its immediate business environment. Considering all of these problems, there is a practical necessity to investigate the impact of networking among entrepreneurs on business development of SMEs in Ogoja.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to examine the effect of entrepreneurial networking on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja. The specific objectives were:

1.To determine the effect of networking capability on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

2.To assess the effect of network ties on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

3.To examine the effect of network diversity on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

1.4 Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1.To what extent does networking capability affect the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja?

2.To what extent do network ties affect the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja?

3.To what extent does network diversity affect the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja?

1.5 Statement of hypotheses

The following hypotheses styled in the null form guided the study:
$H_0$1: Networking capability has no significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.
$H_0$2: Network ties have no significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.
$H_0$3: Network diversity has no significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual framework

2.1.1 Concept of entrepreneurial Networking

Entrepreneurial networking is an aspect that relates to the relationships, contacts, and linkages that entrepreneurs make use of to enhance their firms' survival, success, and development. Networking is more than just about knowing people. In business parlance, entrepreneurial networking will become effective only when the entrepreneur can build, nurture, and capitalize on the relationship for the purpose of gaining information, resources, referral, market linkage, advice, innovative ideas, and other benefits that can be helpful for business operations (Sendawula et al., 2023). For small and medium scale enterprises, particularly where there are high levels of competition and resource constraints, entrepreneurship networking is often the connection between what the business is unable to get from its internal environment and what it needs to achieve from the external environment (Aladejebi, 2020; Albourini et al., 2020). With regard to the SMEs, entrepreneurial networking can take various forms such as customer, supplier, competitor, fellow entrepreneur, financial institution, co-operative societies, trade association, government, family, friend, digital business community and other types of connections. These can be either formal or informal links depending on how the relationship was developed. While some relationships can arise due to membership in certain business organizations, others could arise out of customer referrals, supply chain management, social media platforms, markets groups, community linkage, or friendship among others. What really matters in this type of networking is the ability to capitalize on such connections in terms of enhancing business performance and growth. The reason for this is because networking is one of the factors that influence MSME performance (Abidin et al., 2023), as well as being linked to SME performance, entrepreneurial orientation, competitiveness, innovation, and sustainable growth (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021; Alamanda et al., 2024; Arshad et al., 2023; Mensah et al., 2026).

2.1.2 Networking capability

Networking capability refers to the ability of entrepreneurs and business owners to identify potential business associates, form relationships with them, keep these relationships and exploit them for the benefit of improving the performance and growing their businesses. It is different from knowing people or being part of a business community. The owner of an SME business may have many contacts but fail to make any use out of them as a result of poor management of these relationships and failure to relate them to business operations. Therefore, networking capability involves making full use of both social and business relations to obtain benefits such as customers, suppliers, market intelligence, business advice, financing, innovation, and widening markets (Albourini et al., 2020; Karami et al., 2023; Marcano Nieves et al., 2025). Networking capability is especially significant to SMEs since many of these businesses lack proper resources. Some do not even have enough finances or competent staff, formal market research systems, sophisticated technological tools, and institutional backing. Therefore, they must depend on their external connections to bridge this gap. According to Abu-Rumman et al. (2021), entrepreneurial networks can be used to improve the performance of SMEs in tandem with entrepreneurial orientation and dynamic capabilities. Also, the use of networking capability as an entrepreneurial tool to facilitate enterprise development was illustrated by Omeke et al. (2021) where it is evident that networking capability is used to translate the business capabilities into growth achievements. In addition, Hussain et al. (2026) linked business networking, dynamic capabilities, innovations, finance and financial performance. The implication of this is that networking capability allows SME businesses to overcome their internal limitations by accessing the necessary resources externally. The advent of digital platforms has broadened the scope of networking capability. Entrepreneurs have been able to go beyond face-to-face meetings by using digital platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, online communities and others to establish contacts, market their goods and services, communicate with customers, receive orders and maintain business presence. Tiwasing (2021) concluded that business social media networks affect SME performance positively while according to Karinki et al. (2020), social media can help enhance the effect of entrepreneurship networking on SME performance. Norvadewi and Parlina (2025) also established a connection between entrepreneurial networks and digital marketing and MSME performance. This implies that the modern definition of networking capability encompasses physical and digital networking skills.

2.1.3 Network ties

Network ties are defined as the relationship or linkage between an entrepreneur and the individuals, firms, or organizations within his/her business environment. As far as small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) are concerned, network ties might include customers, suppliers, fellow entrepreneurs, relatives, friends, financial institutions, co-operatives, trade associations, governmental bodies, or online business relationships (Aladejebi, 2020). They are considered the means by which an entrepreneur obtains information, gets support, gains access to resources, receives recommendations, and creates new business opportunities. Network ties play a particularly important role for SMEs since small businesses are typically characterized by low internal capabilities and thus rely strongly on external relations (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021; Albourini et al., 2020; Sendawula et al., 2023). It should be noted that the concept of network ties has much in common with another idea – that of the non-isolated existence of entrepreneurs. The decisions made by a business owner, market penetration, customer acquisition, and expansion prospects depend on the relations he/she establishes. A firm owner who possesses good ties with his/her suppliers might obtain his products on credit or learn about the price change early. The same applies to a firm owner with good ties with his clients. His customers may recommend him to others, thereby creating new sales opportunities for him. Likewise, relations with other entrepreneurs can serve as sources of advice, market knowledge, business collaboration, or psychological support in hard times. These examples explain the association between networking and business success in many recent studies (Achama & Wegwu, 2023; Alamanda et al., 2024; Mensah et al., 2026). Network ties can be of two types – strong and weak – each of which might prove helpful under certain circumstances. Strong ties are characterized by closeness, high level of trust, and frequent interactions. Some examples include loyal customers, reliable suppliers, family members, solid business partners, and other entrepreneurs with whom a business owner deals. These ties are quite beneficial to SMEs since they are built on a trustworthy relationship, reliability, and help. Among other benefits, strong ties might help small enterprises establish supplier credit, obtain customer loyalty, referrals, shared risks, and assistance in case of uncertainties. WANAMBISI et al. (2023) found that entrepreneurial networking relations are associated with the growth of SMEs. At the same time, the positive influence of networking was proved to extend to entrepreneurial marketing via word-of-mouth communication by Robledo et al. (2023).

2.1.4 Network diversity

Network diversity involves the range of relations, contacts, and institutions an entrepreneur can establish within the process of doing business. Diversity within an entrepreneur's business network is not about the number of contacts an entrepreneur has. Instead, network diversity takes into account the range of diverse actors in the entrepreneur's business environment, together with the value that such a diverse range of actors may offer (Hou et al., 2024). When talking about small and medium-scale enterprises, network diversity would involve relationships between the entrepreneur and customers, suppliers, competitors, fellow entrepreneurs, cooperative societies, financial institutions, trade organizations, government agencies, local communities, professionals, digital business networks, and many other contacts. Network diversity ensures that the entrepreneur has access to varied sources of information, resources, markets, opportunities, and other business advantages that increase chances for success (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021; Aladejebi, 2020; Clifton et al., 2020). Knowledge exposure is a great benefit that can be gained through network diversity because the business world is full of different players who generate new knowledge, information, and resources needed for business success. For example, customers can inform about changes in their tastes and preferences, suppliers – about changes in pricing trends, fellow entrepreneurs – about new experiences in the market, while banks would share information on possible credit facilities. Government organizations and trade organizations will also introduce entrepreneurs to training, regulation, grant opportunities, and business development initiatives. Leick and Gretzinger (2020) underscore the role of business networking in facilitating knowledge sharing among SMEs, while Mulyana and Wasitowati (2021) demonstrated benefits of collaborative networks for SMEs. In the same vein, Clifton et al. (2020) have made a connection between networking and strategic planning and SME growth. According to these studies, when entrepreneurs come into contact with people from various backgrounds, they become more likely to gain knowledge helpful in making decisions. Networking contributes to opportunity recognition. If entrepreneurs are involved with only a limited number of people, they are unlikely to view their business ventures in a fresh perspective. However, if they come into contact with various individuals and organisations, they will be able to learn about customer needs, market needs, product developments, and other business opportunities available to them. Khamis & Yusof (2024) associated entrepreneurial networking with opportunity recognition by young entrepreneurs, while Arshad et al. (2023) found that entrepreneurial networking could affect business performance through mediation and moderation effects. This means that entrepreneurs are more likely to recognise opportunities that may otherwise escape their attention. Such business opportunities for the owner of an SME include entering new markets, diversifying products offered by their companies, engaging in collaboration, embracing digital marketing techniques, and finding alternative sources of supplies.

2.1.5 Business growth of SMEs

Growth for small and medium scale enterprises can be described as the process of gradual improvement and development of a business overtime. It is characterized by increase in sales, profit, customer base, market share, employees, diversification of products, business expansion and sustainability (Abu-Rumman et al. 2021). Business growth for SMEs is not always associated with the transformation of an SME into a large firm. At times, growth could simply be described as improvement from unstable to stable patronage, from one store to two, from selling within small market reach to expanding to wider markets and so forth. As such, growth for SMEs is both financial and nonfinancial. In SME literature, there is always a relationship between business growth and performance since a growing business is expected to improve in sales, profitability, innovation, market entry, customer acquisition and sustainability among others. According to Abidin et al. (2023), MSME business performance is affected by such things as networking, work culture and reputation; indicating that growth of SMEs is both determined by internal practices and external connections. Likewise, in linking entrepreneurial network, entrepreneurial orientation and SME performance, Abu-Rumman et al. (2021) established that growth of business involves entrepreneurs' abilities to utilize the available resources and opportunities for development. This is crucial since SMEs seldom experience growth in relation to one aspect. Instead, it is usually a function of finances, relationships, abilities, innovation, market and owners responsiveness among others.

2.1.6 Entrepreneurial networking and business growth of SMEs

Entrepreneurial networking has emerged as a significant topic within small business literature due to the fact that SMEs seldom depend entirely on their internal capabilities when growing (Aladejebi, 2020). Often, small business owners require networks to reach customers, suppliers, funding opportunities, information, recommendations, technologies, and market openings. In this case, developing economies are characterized by poor and challenging availability of formal means of business development support. As a result, entrepreneurial networking involves more than mere socialization. Networking becomes a business process, during which entrepreneurs engage in forming and using relationships to enhance their survival chances and competitive advantages as well as facilitate business growth (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021; Albourini et al., 2020; Sendawula et al., 2023). The link between entrepreneurial networking and SME performance and growth has been proven in many researches. For instance, Abidin et al. (2023) listed the role of networking as an element influencing MSME business performance, demonstrating that business performance is influenced by networking. In addition, in Nigeria, Aladejebi (2020) explored the effects of entrepreneurial network on small business performance and revealed the significance of networks for SMEs. Further, Achama and Wegwu (2023) paid attention to the topic of entrepreneurial networks and sustainable business growth among SMEs in Rivers State, demonstrating networking as a significant factor that ensures not only business performance but also its survival in the long term. All these studies make a good starting point for studying small businesses in Ogoja, where relationships, customer referrals, supply chains, and other networks play an essential part. The literature review shows that entrepreneurial networking influences the growth of SMEs in several ways. The influence includes the ability to obtain relevant information, resource availability, customer-supplier network building, innovativeness, market presence, and awareness of the opportunities. Various studies in Nigeria, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere show the relationship between entrepreneurship networking and SMEs' performance, competitiveness, innovativeness, sustainability, and business development (Achama & Wegwu, 2023; Aladejebi, 2020; Arshad et al., 2023; Ngera et al., 2024; Nyamosi et al., 2026; Sagita et al., 2025; Wanambisi et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). On the other hand, the literature indicates that all kinds of networks are not beneficial. The ability to develop competent and robust networks is crucial for growth.

2.2 Theoretical framework

This study was anchored on Social Network Theory. The theory is relevant because it explains how entrepreneurs use relationships, contacts, and capabilities to support business growth.

2.2.1 Social network theory

Social Network Theory is associated with the work of Barnes (1954), and was expanded by Granovetter (1973) and Burt (1992). According to Social Network Theory, social actors, individuals and organizations alike, are embedded in a network of relations that have a certain impact on their activities. Secondly, this network impacts the degree of access to information, opportunities, resources, support and power possessed by social actors. Finally, a particular network configuration of an actor will influence the outcomes that can be reached through his or her actions. The relevance of the theory to this study lies in its capacity to clarify the connection between network ties and network diversity and SME business growth. Indeed, a good relationship within the network can help an entrepreneur in gaining trust and referrals, developing loyal customers and receiving support from suppliers, as well as obtaining valuable information for business operations. For instance, an SME entrepreneur who has strong ties to both suppliers and consumers can receive orders, business referrals or supplies on credit. This will assist him or her in increasing business revenue and surviving as a business entity. The second part of the theory relevant to this research relates to the importance of having a diverse network. In other words, when SME owners interact with a variety of individuals and institutions (customers, suppliers, financial establishments, cooperative societies, government bodies, business associations and other entrepreneurs), this exposes them to more opportunities.

2.2.2 Resource-based view theory

The Resource-Based View Theory was proposed by Barney in 1991; however, previous studies about the firm's resource were put forward by Wernerfelt in 1984. This theory argues that organizations have competitive advantage because they use resources which are valuable, rare, costly to imitate, and costly to substitute. Moreover, the theory assumes that the resources do not necessarily refer to tangible assets such as financial resources, machines, or property. Rather, they include intangible resources such as knowledge, skills, experiences, relationships, reputation, and capabilities of the organization. Lastly, it assumes that organizations would perform well if they were capable of integrating their resources.

The relevance of resource-based view theory to the study is that it discusses networking capability as a strategic resource. Networking capability is the ability of an entrepreneur to recognize contacts and develop, communicate, and utilize relations with the aim of benefiting from them. An SME owner might know a large number of people, yet without the ability to utilize them efficiently, networking would not make much sense. In terms of SMEs in Ogoja, networking capability enables the owner of the business to reach out to customers, suppliers, capital, information about the market, and business opportunities.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research design

The descriptive survey research design was employed in the study. The choice of this research design was due to the nature of the study, which aimed at eliciting information from SME owners, managers, and senior personnel about the networking behavior within their organizations and how these behaviors influence business growth. In addition, the design would allow for an examination of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables without manipulation of the variables.

3.2 Population of the study

Study participants were drawn from all the registered small and medium scale enterprises within Ogoja. In this case, the SMEs that participated in the research included those involved in retailing of goods and services, those in agro based industries and those in small scale manufacturing. From the available records of the concerned SME developmental and registering organizations like SMEDAN, Cross River State Ministry of Commerce and Industry and NASME, it is approximated that the accessible population of the study would consist of 789 SMEs. In this case, the SME owners, managers and senior staff were targeted in the study due to their involvement in making business related decisions, building customers and suppliers relationships, networking among other aspects.

3.3 Sample Size Determination

The sample size was calculated to be 259 SMEs through the use of Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size calculation table for a finite population. The sample size was appropriate as it gave a representative sample of the population without being too large. The sample consisted of respondents selected from the different categories of SMEs within Ogoja.

Table 3.1 Industry Classification and Sample Distribution of SMEs in Ogoja

Industry Category	Estimated Population Proportion (%)	Population Estimate (N = 789)	Sample Allocation (n = 259)
Retail Trade	38%	300	98
Services	32%	252	83
Agro-based Enterprises	20%	158	52
Manufacturing / Small-scale Production	10%	79	26
Total	**100%**	**789**	**259**

Source: Researcher's computation (2026)

3.4 Sampling technique

The methodology used in the study involved the use of a stratified random sampling technique. This type of sampling was necessary because small and medium-sized businesses within the area have different business groups. First, the various SMEs were categorized into groups depending on the particular category they fall under, such as retail trade, services, agro-based companies, and manufacturing firms. Once this was done, a random selection of respondents from the various categories was undertaken depending on the population of each group.

3.5 Source of data

Most of the data collected in the study were primary. The primary data was gathered from the SMEs' owners, management, and senior staff members using questionnaires. It is worth noting that the study needed the primary data to gain insights into the extent to which small and medium enterprises in Ogoja utilize networking capabilities for business growth.

3.6 Instrument of data collection

The data were collected through the use of structured questionnaire prepared by the researcher himself. The questionnaire had two sections. Section A consisted of demographic and business-related data such as age, sex, educational qualification, kind of business, number of years in business, etc. Section B had questions pertaining to the variables being studied. These answers were coded on the basis of the five-point Likert Scale. This scale ranged from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The reason for coding using Likert Scale was that it would help respondents to state their degree of agreement or disagreement with regard to every statement.

3.7 Validity and reliability of the instrument

In order to validate the questionnaire, it was submitted to entrepreneurs and researchers who gave their comments. They provided feedback on the questionnaire which enabled the researcher to come up with clear and appropriate questions that measure what is intended. Reliability was achieved by conducting a pilot study involving 30 small businesses in an adjacent area away from the sampling area. This was important to avoid contamination of the final respondents. The reliability was tested by analyzing data from the pilot test using Cronbach's alpha measure.

Table 3.2 Reliability Test

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Networking Capability	3	0.872
Network Ties	3	0.864
Network Diversity	3	0.881
Business Growth of SMEs	3	0.903

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2026)

The findings on reliability presented in Table 3.2 indicate that all the constructs met an acceptable level of internal consistency. In relation to networking capability, Cronbach's alpha of 0.872 suggests that the items employed in the measurement of the concept are reliable. For network ties, the internal consistency is 0.864, which is very high. The internal consistency for network diversity is 0.881, while the internal consistency for business growth of SMEs is 0.903, an indication of excellent reliability.

3.8 Method of data analysis

The data obtained from the field was coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 27. The descriptive statistics included frequency distribution, percentages, and mean scores, which described the demographics and responses of the participants. Inferential statistics, particularly multiple regression analysis, was used to analyze the impact of entrepreneurship network on SME growth within Ogoja. The hypotheses were tested at 5%. The model is specified as:

$$BGSME = f(NC, NT, ND) \quad (1)$$

$$BGSME = \alpha + \beta_1 NC + \beta_2 NT + \beta_3 ND + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

Where:
α = Constant term; β_1–β_3 = Regression coefficients; ε = Error term; BGSME = Business Growth of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises; NC = Networking Capability; NT = Network Ties; ND = Network Diversity.

4.0 Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

4.1 Data presentation

Table 4.1: Response Rate of Questionnaire

Description	Number of Questionnaires	Percentage (%)
Questionnaires Distributed	259	100
Questionnaires Returned	218	84.2
Questionnaires Not Returned	41	15.8
Total	**259**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The response rate for the questionnaire issued in this study is shown in Table 4.1 below. In this regard, a total of 259 questionnaires were distributed among owners/managers and senior employees of SMEs operating in Ogoja. Out of these, 218 questionnaires were filled in and returned, giving a response rate of 84.2 percent. On the other hand, 41 questionnaires, which give a percentage of 15.8 percent of the total questionnaires issued, did not get back. The response rate of 84.2 percent can be said to be adequate for use in statistical computations. It indicates that many of the participants selected participated in the study. As such, the data will be useful in finding the impact of entrepreneurial networking on the growth of SMEs operating in Ogoja.

Table 4.2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	128	58.7
	Female	90	41.3
	Total	**218**	**100**
Age	Below 25 years	39	17.9
	25–34 years	78	35.8
	35–44 years	66	30.3
	45 years and above	35	16.1
	Total	**218**	**100**
Educational Qualification	SSCE/WAEC	49	22.5
	NCE/OND	65	29.8
	HND/B.Sc.	82	37.6
	Postgraduate	22	10.1
	Total	**218**	**100**
Business Category	Retail Trade	83	38.1
	Services	70	32.1
	Agro-based Enterprise	44	20.2
	Manufacturing/Small-scale Production	21	9.6

	Total	**218**	**100**
Years of Business Operation	Below 1 year	27	12.4
	1–5 years	78	35.8
	6–10 years	72	33.0
	Above 10 years	41	18.8
	Total	**218**	**100**
Position in the Business	Owner	107	49.1
	Manager	67	30.7
	Senior Staff	44	20.2
	Total	**218**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents in the study are given in Table 4.2 below. The analysis of data relied on the questionnaires that were successfully returned (218). Concerning gender, 128 respondents, making up 58.7 percent of the total number, were males, whereas 90 respondents constituted 41.3 percent. Thus, male respondents dominated SME operators studied, but female respondents also made up a considerable percentage.

As regards age, the biggest number of respondents was 78 persons falling under 25-34 years old, representing 35.8 percent. In the second place comes the number of respondents from the age category 35-44, which is 66 respondents constituting 30.3 percent of the total number. The lowest number of the respondents was 39 falling under less than 25 years old (17.9 percent), while 35 (16.1 percent) were above 45 years old. These results demonstrate that SME operators in the study belonged to the working age, and were able to conduct business effectively.

Concerning educational qualification, 82 respondents, constituting 37.6 percent, had attained the level HND/B.Sc., whereas 65 respondents, making up 29.8 percent, had attained NCE/OND. At the same time, 49 respondents had obtained SSCE/WAEC, which represents 22.5 percent, and 22 respondents had postgraduate qualifications, which constitutes 10.1 percent. Most respondents thus possessed some formal education.

In regard to the business categories, 83 respondents who comprised 38.1 percent were in retail trade, while 70 respondents who constituted 32.1 percent were engaged in service businesses. The agro-based businesses constituted 44 respondents who were 20.2 percent, while manufacturing/ small scale business constituted 21 respondents, which was 9.6 percent. The above figures indicate that the majority of the respondents belonged to retail trade and services business category.

With regard to number of years business was conducted, 78 respondents who comprised 35.8 percent had been running business between 1 – 5 years, while 72 respondents who comprised 33 percent had been in business between 6 – 10 years. In addition, 41 respondents who comprised 18.8 percent were in business more than 10 years, while 27 respondents who comprised 12.4 percent had been in business less than one year. From the above figures, it is evident that many of the respondents had business experience that could be useful in gathering entrepreneurial networking and business growth. Lastly, with regard to position held in the business, 107 respondents who comprised 49.1 percent were business owners, 67 respondents who constituted 30.7 percent were managers, while 44 respondents who comprised 20.2 percent were senior staff in the business.

4.2 Test of hypotheses

Table 4.3: Multicollinearity Test

Variable	Tolerance	Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)
Constant		
Networking Capability	0.684	1.462
Network Ties	0.637	1.570
Network Diversity	0.711	1.407

a. Dependent Variable: Business Growth of SMEs
Source: Researcher's Computation, 2026.

Multicollinearity tests performed in Table 4.3 showed that the independent variables used in this case were not highly related to each other. The tolerance values for networking capacity, network connections, and network diversification are all greater than the minimum required level of 0.10. Moreover, all VIF values are less than the cut-off points of 10. Hence, there was no problem of multicollinearity among the independent variables. This makes the data appropriate for performing multiple regression analysis.

Table 4.4: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin–Watson
1	0.831[a]	0.691	0.687	0.456	1.921

a. **Predictors:** Constant, Networking Capability, Network Ties, Network Diversity
b. **Dependent Variable:** Business Growth of SMEs

Source: Researcher's Computation, 2026.

According to Table 4.4, there is a strong association between networking ability, network relationships, and diversity in relation to the growth of SMEs located in Ogoja, as seen in the value of R at 0.831. The R Square value at 0.691 indicates that 69.1% of the variability in the growth of SMEs is accounted for by the independent variables. This implies that entrepreneurial networking plays a significant role in the change in the growth of SMEs in the research area. In addition, the Adjusted R Square at 0.687 implies that the model still stands robustly even when adjusted for the number of predictors. The value of Durbin-Watson at 1.921 is close to 2 and therefore implies that there is no problem of auto-correlation in the model.

Table 4.5: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	121.745	3	40.582	159.520	0.000[b]
Residual	54.435	214	0.254		
Total	176.180	217			

a. **Dependent Variable:** Business Growth of SMEs
b. **Predictors:** Constant, Networking Capability, Network Ties, Network Diversity

Source: Researcher's Computation, 2026.

From the ANOVA table above (Table 4.5), it is clear that the regression model in general is statistically significant as it is represented by an F-value of 159.520 with $p = 0.000$. As such, since the p-value is lower than 0.05, it is therefore evident that network capability, network ties, and network diversification together significantly influence SMEs' business development in Ogoja.

Table 4.6: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
Constant	0.642	0.166		3.867	0.000
Networking Capability	0.318	0.053	0.352	5.998	0.000
Network Ties	0.281	0.055	0.308	5.109	0.000
Network Diversity	0.241	0.050	0.269	4.820	0.000

a. **Dependent Variable:** Business Growth of SMEs

Source: Researcher's Computation, 2026.

Test of Hypothesis One

$H_0$1: Networking capability has no significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

$H_1$1: Networking capability has a significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

From Table 4.6, the value of networking capability indicates a positive impact on the growth of small medium enterprises (SMEs) operating in Ogoja ($\beta = 0.352$, $t = 5.998$, $p < .000$). The significance level being less than 0.05, it leads to rejection of the null hypothesis and acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that there is an influence of networking capability on business growth. In other words, the owners of SMEs who are able to create network connections can achieve success in terms of business growth.

Test of Hypothesis Two

$H_0$2: Network ties have no significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

$H_1$2: Network ties have a significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

From the regression analysis above, it is evident that the presence of social ties positively influences business growth among the SMEs operating in Ogoja ($\beta = 0.308$, $t = 5.109$, $p = 0.000$). Given that the p-value is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis while accepting the alternative. This indicates that business ties play a significant role in facilitating business growth. By establishing good relations with business customers, suppliers, and other business partners, one is in a better position to enjoy the benefits of such networks.

Test of Hypothesis Three

$H_0$3: Network diversity has no significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

$H_1$3: Network diversity has a significant effect on the business growth of small and medium scale enterprises operating in Ogoja.

Network diversity positively influences the growth of the SMEs in Ogoja ($\beta = 0.269$, $t = 4.820$, $p = 0.000$), as indicated in Table 4.6. Due to the fact that the value of p is smaller than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and adopt the alternative hypothesis, which means that there is evidence for growth among the SMEs whose business contacts are diverse. A business person who maintains relations with various categories of individuals and organizations such as customers, suppliers, other business persons, organizations, and financiers has better chances to gain access to ideas, sources, opportunities, and markets. Network diversity helps to enhance the growth of the SMEs in Ogoja.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

On the basis of the result of the first hypothesis, the findings of the current study show that networking capability has a positive and statistically significant impact on the business growth of SMEs in Ogoja. Thus, networking capability can help the owner of an SME who identifies potential network resources and utilizes the relationships he maintains for gaining business advantage in terms of growing sales, clientele and business stability. Practically speaking, networking capability is beneficial for entrepreneurs who have been able to go beyond making contacts. Networking capability helps entrepreneurs make use of relationships with their customers, suppliers, fellow entrepreneurs, associations and even financial contacts to get information, referrals and market opportunities. The results of this study are in line with the findings of Achama and Wegwu (2023), who stated that entrepreneurial networking capabilities like coordination and relational skills had a strong association with the sustainable growth of SMEs in Rivers State. The same is supported by Murtini et al. (2024), who indicated that networking positively influenced innovation capability and MSME performance. From the test of hypothesis two, the conclusion made was that network relations have a positive and statistically significant impact on the growth of businesses run by SMEs in Ogoja. What this means is that SMEs that enjoy strong and reliable relations benefit through referrals, repeat business, business advice and assistance, suppliers' support and other ways. Within an environment of doing business like the one at Ogoja, where trust and personal relations play a crucial role in business deals, relations can be useful for SMEs in bringing customers, holding on to repeat buyers, and surviving tough times in the market. This finding corroborates those of Wanambisi et al. (2023) who concluded that there was a positive and significant influence of entrepreneurial network relations on the growth of SMEs in Kenya. It also confirms those of Ngera et al. (2024), who concluded that entrepreneurial networks practices have a positive and significant impact on the performance of youth agri-business enterprises in Kenya. It is noteworthy that the results of the analysis done to test hypothesis three showed that network diversity positively affects the growth of businesses in Ogoja. In particular, the results indicate that the more diverse an entrepreneur's network is, the better the chances for the SME owners to get access to a broader base of resources and information. By having more connections outside of one's family, circle of close friends and regular clientele, entrepreneurs can get to know other individuals such as suppliers, banks and cooperatives that will help in the development of the business. The above result is consistent with findings by Mensah et al. (2026). These authors established that small businesses are engaged in business, social and political networks and noted that entrepreneurial networking is essential to sustainable business growth. It is also in line with the work of Wanambisi et al. (2023), where it was discovered that strong and weak ties networking relationships help during different enterprise development stages, because they provide innovative resources and information.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study led to the conclusion that there is significant influence of entrepreneurial networking on the growth of SMEs running their businesses in Ogoja. It was discovered that networking capacity, networking relationship, and networking diversity positively and significantly influenced SME growth. This implies that SMEs experience enhanced growth when SMEs owners/managers are capable of making contact with relevant individuals, maintaining business relationship, and developing networking diversities that would open doors to their customers, suppliers, sources of finance, information, and market. From this point, it can be concluded that entrepreneurs' networking should not be considered just as social activity but as a strategic approach to improve sales and profitability. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The network capacity of SME proprietors needs improvement. They should know how to find the right connections and make good use of them in terms of getting customers, suppliers, funding, information and opportunities in the markets.
2. Operators of SMEs should enhance their network relations. It is necessary to cultivate trusting relations among customers, suppliers, fellow business people, cooperatives and business organizations. Good relations will lead to good recommendations, repeated business patronage and better business relations.
3. SME businesses should create more varied business networks. The proprietors should not be dependent solely on family, acquaintances and regular clients but must widen their business network to include banks, trade organizations, government organizations, cooperatives and entrepreneurs from different industries.

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