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MANAGERS AND ACCOUNTANTS PERCEPTION OF BUSINESS NETWORKING ON PERFORMANCE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIAN

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Abstract

The importance of business networking in enhancing the performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) has gained significant attention in recent years. This study examines the perceptions of managers and accountants concerning the role of business networking in the performance of SMEs in the South-South region of Nigeria. The study employed descriptive survey research design. The study was carried out in the South-South States Nigeria. The population of the study was 220696 Managers and Accountants of small and medium scale Enterprises. A sample of 384 registered Managers and Accountants of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises was obtained. A structured questionnaire titled "Managers and accountants perceptions in business networking on performance of small and medium enterprises questionnaire" (MAPBNPQ), was used for the purpose of collecting data from the respondents. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher. The questionnaire is structured on a four- point rating scale of Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Disagreed (SD) and strongly Disagreed (SD). The reliability coefficient of 0.76 was ascertained using a cronbach alpha. Five experts validated the instrument. The research question was analysed using mean and standard deviation while independent t-test was used to analysed the null hypotheses at 0.05 probability level. The data for the study was collected with the help of six research assistants. The finding of the study showed that; formal, informal and international business networking influences the performances of small and medium enterprises in south- south Nigeria.

Key words: Managers' Perception, Accountants' Perception, Business Networking and Performance of SMEs.

1.0 Introduction

Business networking has become an essential aspect of business success, especially for Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs). SMEs play a critical role in the global economy, contributing to employment, innovation, and economic growth. However, many SMEs face challenges related to limited resources, access to markets, and information asymmetry. One of the strategies that SMEs utilize to overcome these challenges is business networking, which enables them to gain access to valuable resources, partnerships, and opportunities. Business networking refers to the process of creating and maintaining relationships with individuals, organizations, or groups that provide support, information, or potential business opportunities (Möller & Halinen, 2000). For managers and accountants in SMEs, networking offers several benefits, including increased market exposure, access to new customers and suppliers, and the sharing of knowledge and best practices. However, the perceptions of managers and accountants toward the impact of business networking on the performance of SMEs may differ due to their distinct roles and responsibilities.

Managers, as strategic decision-makers, often view networking as a means to expand their business horizons, form alliances, and explore new markets (Gulati, 1999). For managers, the key benefits of networking include the development of strategic partnerships and the ability to leverage external resources to enhance competitive advantage (Burt, 2000). Accountants, on the other hand, typically focus on the financial aspects of business operations and may view networking from the perspective of risk management, cost control, and financial stability (Dye & Sunder, 2001). While accountant appreciate the financial benefits of networking, such as cost reduction or the generation of new revenue streams, they are cautious about the risks associated with new business relationships. The impact of business networking on the performance of SMEs is a subject of significant interest among scholars and practitioners. Networking positively influence the performance of SMEs by providing access to resources, enhancing innovation, and improving financial outcomes (Iacobucci & Rosa, 2005). Networking allows SMEs to gain valuable insights into market trends, identify potential business opportunities, and collaborate with other businesses to overcome common challenges (Johannisson, 2000). Networking with suppliers leds to cost savings through bulk purchasing or improved supplier terms, while networking with customers' result in increased sales and market share (Coviello & Munro, 1997).

Despite the positive outcomes associated with business networking, some challenges arise, particularly in terms of managing relationships and ensuring that the benefits of networking outweigh the costs (Liao, 2003). Therefore, the perceptions of managers and accountants regarding business networking is crucial to developing effective strategies for leveraging networking to improve the performance of SMEs.

The role of business networking in the performance of Small and Medium Scale

Enterprises (SMEs) has garnered increasing attention from scholars, managers, and accountants alike. Over the years, the perceptions of managers and accountants regarding business networking is crucial because their perspectives shape the strategies SMEs adopt in the competitive business landscape. Managers, especially in SMEs, have been widely recognized as central figures in business networking due to their role in decision-making and strategy formulation (Hite & Hesterly, 2001). Managers view networking as a strategic tool for expanding the firm's market reach, gaining competitive advantages, and fostering innovation (Lamine,2015). By engaging in networking activities, managers access critical resources such as financial capital, knowledge, and expertise, which can enhance the firm's capacity to innovate and improve its performance (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003).

Networking also facilitates the creation of valuable partnerships with other firms, leading to collaboration opportunities, joint ventures, and strategic alliances that improve market positioning (Etemad & Wright, 2003). Networking allows managers to establish credibility and trust within their industry, which in turn attract new customers and strengthen supplier relationships (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Managers also perceive certain challenges in networking, such as the time and financial resources required for attending events, maintaining relationships, and managing potential risks associated with unfamiliar partners (Uzzi, 1997). These challenges affect the perceived benefits of networking and influence how managers weigh the value of networking in their decision-making processes.

In contrast to managers, accountants often focus on the financial implications of business activities, including the cost-benefit analysis of networking (Cohen & Winn, 2007). Managers focus on strategic advantages, accountants typically evaluate how networking impacts the firm’s financial performance, risk management, and overall financial stability (Bromiley & Rau, 2014). They are more likely to assess the tangible outcomes of networking, such as increased sales, cost savings, and enhanced profitability (Eddleston, 2013). Accountants adopt a more cautious approach to business networking, emphasizing risk control and financial prudence. Networking activities result in tangible financial returns, such as access to cheaper suppliers, new customers, or business expansion opportunities, are generally perceived positively by accountants (Madsen, 2012). Accountants is concerned about potential financial risks related to networking, such as cash flow issues arising from late payments or the financial instability of new business partners (Foss, 2011). Accountants' concerns about financial risk are grounded in the need to ensure the sustainability and profitability of the SME in the long term.

The overall impact of business networking on SME performance is a key area of interest in the literature. Networking leads to increased market access, better resource allocation, and improved business performance (Birley, 1985; Cummings & Holmberg, 2012). Networking enhances

SMEs' ability to overcome resource constraints, improve operational efficiency, and gain access to new markets and customers (Davis & Luthans, 2005). From a performance perspective, networking activities enable SMEs to establish stronger ties with suppliers and customers, leading to better terms, lower costs, and increased sales (Kale, 2000). Networking serve as a means for knowledge sharing, enabling SMEs to stay competitive by learning from industry peers, gaining insights into emerging market trends, and adopting best practices (Harrison, 2004). The positive impact of networking on SME performance has been well-documented across various industries. The technology sector, networking facilitates access to expertise, talent, and venture capital, thereby fostering innovation and supporting the growth of SMEs (Liu, 2017). In the manufacturing sector, networking is essential for sourcing new suppliers, obtaining favorable contracts, and achieving economies of scale (Harrison, 2015). The effectiveness of networking is also contingent on the quality of the relationships and the manager's ability to manage and sustain these connections (Granovetter, 2025). The benefits of networking do not always materialize automatically, as firms face difficulties in maintaining meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships. Some SMEs struggle to identify and participate in the right networks, which limit the potential benefits of networking (Lin, 2021).

1.1 Statement of Problems:

The role of business networking in the performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) is widely recognized as crucial for their growth and sustainability. The perceptions of managers and accountants regarding the impact of networking on SME performance vary, creating distinct challenges that need to be addressed in order to optimize networking activities and their outcomes for SMEs. Networking is generally seen as a strategic tool for growth, the differences in how managers and accountants view it particularly regarding its value, risks, and financial implications present a series of complex problems that need further exploration.

Managers and accountants often have divergent perceptions of the strategic importance of business networking. For managers, networking is primarily viewed as a tool for creating strategic alliances, identifying new business opportunities, and expanding market reach (Johannisson, 2020; Hite & Hesterly, 2021). Networking helps SMEs access resources, knowledge, and new markets that are vital for competitive advantage. On the other hand, accountants tend to view networking with a more cautious lens, focusing on the financial aspects of relationships rather than the broader strategic potential (; Eddleston, 2013; Bromiley & Rau, 2014). For accountants, the main concern lies in assessing the financial risks and returns associated with networking, particularly the financial stability and reliability of new business relationships. This discrepancy in perception lead to misalignment in how networking strategies are designed and implemented, potentially reducing their effectiveness. A significant issue in business networking is the tension between

short-term costs and long-term benefits. Networking often requires a considerable investment of time, money, and effort (Uzzi, 2017). While managers see these investments as necessary for long-term growth and market positioning, accountants view them as expenses that strain the firm's short-term financial performance (Cohen & Winn, 2007). Accountants are typically more focused on immediate returns and cost control, leading to possible conflicts when networking opportunities do not result in quick financial returns.

One of the key challenges in evaluating the effectiveness of networking is measuring its impact on SME performance. There is evidence that business networking positively influence various aspects of performance (e.g., increased sales, market share, and access to resources), quantifying these benefits remains a complex task (Cummings & Holmberg, 2012). Managers emphasize qualitative outcomes like new partnerships or market visibility, while accountants typically require quantitative data, such as increased revenue or cost savings, to assess the return on investment in networking (Madsen, 2012). The lack of standardized measures for assessing networking outcomes make it difficult for both managers and accountants to evaluate the effectiveness of their networking strategies. Another significant problem faced by SMEs is identifying the right networks and partners that align with their business goals. Managers are driven by opportunities to expand into new markets or acquire new resources, but the challenge lies in selecting networks or partners that offer mutual benefits (Liu, 2017). On the other hand, accountants are more focused on the potential risks and financial implications of engaging with new partners. The problem arises in the difficulty of evaluating the quality of network ties and determining whether these relationships will yield measurable results (Granovetter, 1985; Lamine, 2025). For SMEs, inefficient or poorly managed networks result in wasted resources, financial losses, or even reputational damage.

Business networking does not end with the initial establishment of connections; sustaining long-term relationships is crucial for deriving sustained value. Managers typically focus on maintaining positive relationships with key partners, while accountants are concerned with the financial health of ongoing engagements, especially when they involve costs such as credit terms or extended payment cycles (Burt, 2020). Poor management of network relationships resulting in misunderstandings, unmet expectations, and financial instability. The time and resources invested in nurturing these relationships are substantial, but the results are often difficult to quantify in terms of direct financial performance. Networking inherently involves some degree of risk. For managers, the focus is often on leveraging the opportunities that arise from engaging in new partnerships, entering new markets, or gaining access to innovative ideas (Johannisson, 2020). Accountants are more likely to focus on potential financial risks, such as the risk of non-payment, the financial instability of

partners, or the uncertainty around the longevity of a new business relationship (Foss, 2021). This difference in focus result in SMEs being either overly cautious or overly optimistic in their networking efforts, leading to either missed opportunities or unnecessary exposure to financial risks.

The alignment of networking strategies with the overall business objectives of the SME. Managers often prioritize networking activities that align with long-term business goals such as expansion, innovation, or diversification (Coviello & Munro, 2017). Accountants, however, may focus on strategies that contribute directly to the financial bottom line, such as improving cost efficiency or increasing profitability. The challenge is aligning both perspectives to ensure that networking activities contribute meaningfully to the firm's strategic and financial objectives. let alone thrive has made it imperative to determine the managers and accountants' perception of business networking on performance of small and medium scale enterprises in south-south Nigerian**.**

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study was to determine the perceived influence of business clustering and networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria. Specifically, the study determined the perceived influence of:

1. formal business networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria.
2. informal business networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria.
3. international business networking on the performance of SMEs in the in the South-South states of Nigeria.

1.3 Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the perceived influence of formal business networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria?
2. What is the perceived influence of informal business networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria?
3. What is the perceived influence of international networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria?

1.4 Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses that guided the study were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

6. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of managers and accountants on the perceived influence of formal business networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria.
7. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of managers and accountants on the perceived influence of informal business networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria.
8. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of managers and accountants on the perceived influence of international

business networking on the performance of SMEs in the south-south states of Nigeria.

2.0 Methodology

The study employed descriptive survey research design. The study was carried out in the South-South States Nigeria. The population of the study was 220696 Managers and Accountants of small and medium scale Enterprises. A sample of 384 registered Managers and Accountants of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises was obtained. A structured questionnaire titled "Managers and accountants perceptions in business networking on performance of small and medium enterprises questionnaire" (MAPBNPQ), was used for the purpose of collecting data from the respondents. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher. The questionnaire is structured on a four- point rating scale of Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Disagreed (SD) and strongly Disagreed (SD). The reliability coefficient of 0.76 was ascertained using a cronbach alpha. Five experts validated the instrument. The research question was analysed using mean and standard deviation while independent t-test was used to analysed the null hypotheses at 0.05 probability level. The data for the study was collected with the help of six research assistants.

3.0 Presentation of Results

3.1 Research Question 1: What is the perceived influence of formal business networking on performance of SMEs in South-South Nigeria?

Table 1: **Mean Ratings of Managers and Accountants on the perceived Influence Formal Business Networking on Performance of SMEs in South-South Nigeria**

S/N	Item Statements	Managers N = 174			Accountants N = 196			Total Respondents N =370		
		$\bar{X}_1$	SD_1	DEC_1	$\bar{X}_2$	SD_2	DEC_2	$\bar{X}$	SD	DEC
1	SMEs within the formal network gather feedback from clients through networking channels to assess satisfaction levels.	2.84	0.88	A	2.84	0.93	A	2.84	0.91	A
2	SMEs within the formal network easily track the attendance of SME representatives at formal networking events through conferences/seminars.	2.88	0.82	A	2.93	0.83	A	2.91	0.83	A
3	Regular measurement of the establishment of strategic partnerships with other businesses in the network.	3.01	0.83	A	2.99	0.83	A	3.00	0.83	A
4	SMEs within the formal network evaluate the impact of networking on the organization's social media presence via engagement.	2.94	0.77	A	2.92	0.79	A	2.93	0.78	A

5	SMEs within the formal network evaluate the effectiveness of the network in providing access to resources such as expertise facilities or funding.	2.70	0.85	A	2.71	0.86	A	2.71	0.86	A
6	SMEs within the formal network evaluate the return on investment in terms of time/ money by means of resources spent on networking.	2.65	0.78	A	2.63	0.80	A	2.64	0.79	A
7	SMEs within the formal network track the frequency of repeated collaborations with the same network partners.	2.66	0.90	A	2.65	0.92	A	2.66	0.91	A
8	SMEs within the formal network measure the visibility of SMEs in industry publications blogs or news articles resulting from networking activities	2.76	0.86	A	2.74	0.87	A	2.75	0.87	A
	Cluster	**2.81**	**0.45**	**A**	**2.80**	**0.46**	**A**	**2.81**	**0.46**	**A**

Key: N = Number of respondents, $\bar{X}_1$= mean for managers, SD_1 = Standard Deviation for managers, DEC_1 = Decision for managers, $\bar{X}_2$= mean for accountants, SD_2 = Standard Deviation for accountants, DEC_2 = Decision for accountants

Result on table 5 showed the perceived influence of formal business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south geo-political zone, Nigeria. Result showed that all items have mean ratings of 2.84, 2.88, 3.01, 2.94, 2.70, 2.65, 2.66 and 2.76 with standard deviations of 0.88, 0.82, 0.83, 0.77, 0.85, 0.78, 0.90 and 0.86 respectively for the managers and mean ratings of 2.84, 2.93, 2.99, 2.92, 2.71, 2.63, 2.65 and 2.74 with standard deviations of 0.93, 0.83, 0.83, 0.79, 0.86, 0.80, 0.92 and 0.87 respectively for accountants. This implies that the following are agreed as the perceived influence of formal business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south geo-political zone, Nigeria by managers and accountants; SMEs within the formal network gather feedback from clients through networking channels to assess satisfaction levels, SMEs within the formal network easily track the attendance of SME representatives at formal networking events through conferences/seminars, regular measurement of the establishment of strategic partnerships with other businesses in the network, SMEs within the formal network evaluate the impact of networking on the organization's social media presence via engagement, SMEs within the formal network evaluate the effectiveness of the network in providing access to resources such as expertise facilities or funding, SMEs within the formal network evaluate the return on investment in terms of time/ money by means of resources spent on networking, SMEs within the formal network track the frequency of repeated collaborations with the same network partners and SMEs within the formal network measure the visibility of SMEs in industry publications blogs or news articles resulting from networking activities. The cluster mean of 2.81with a standard deviation of 0.45for managers and 2.80 with standard deviation of 0.46 for accountants showed that formal business networking influences the performance of SMEs in south-south geo-political zone, Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of Managers and Accountants on the perceived influence of formal business networking on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria**.**

ble 2: T-test Analysis of the Mean Ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the perceived Influence of Formal Business Clustering on Performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria. ***Managers* = 174, *Accountants* = 196**

		Manager		*Accountant*					
S/N	**Item Statement**	$\bar{x}$	**SD**	$\bar{x}$	**SD**	**t-value**	**Df**	**Sig**	**Dec.**
1	SMEs within the formal network gather feedback from clients through networking channels to assess satisfaction levels.	2.84	0.88	2.84	0.93	.086	368	0.93	NS
2	SMEs within the formal network easily attract the attendance of SME representatives at formal networking events through conferences/seminars.	2.88	0.82	2.93	0.83	-.632	368	0.53	NS
3	Regular measurement of the establishment of strategic partnerships with other businesses in the network.	3.01	0.83	2.99	0.83	.192	368	.848	NS
4	SMEs within the formal network evaluate the impact of networking on the organization's social media presence via engagement.	2.94	0.77	2.92	0.79	.296	368	.767	NS
5	SMEs within the formal network evaluate the effectiveness of the network in providing access to resources such as expertise facilities or funding.	2.70	0.85	2.71	0.86	-.147	368	.883	NS

6	SMEs within the formal network evaluate the return on investment in terms of time/ money by means of resources spent on networking.	2.65	0.78	2.63	0.80	.266	368	.790	NS
7	SMEs within the formal network track the frequency of repeated collaborations with the same network partners.	2.66	0.90	2.65	0.92	.083	368	.934	NS
8	SMEs within the formal network measure the visibility of SMEs in industry publications blogs or news articles resulting from networking activities	2.76	0.86	2.74	0.87	.209	368	.835	NS
	Cluster t	**2.81**	**0.45**	**2.80**	**0.46**	**.080**	**368**	**.936**	**NS**

Key: N = Number of respondents, $\bar{X}_1$= mean for managers, SD_1 = Standard Deviation for managers, DEC_1 = Decision for managers, $\bar{X}_2$= mean for accountants, SD_2 = Standard Deviation for accountants, DEC_2 = Decision for accountants, S= significant, NS=not significant

Result on Table 2 is a t-test analysis of the difference between the mean ratings of SME Managers and Accountants on influence of formal business clustering on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria. Result shows that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of Managers and Accountants on all the items. This is because the significant values for all the items are greater than 0.05 set as level of significance for testing the hypothesis. A cluster t-value of 0.08 with a degree of freedom of 368 and a significant or probability value of 0.94 were obtained. Since the cluster probability value of 0.94 is greater than 0.05 level of significance (P>0.05). This means that hypothesis six (6) which stated that; there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the influence of formal business clustering on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria, is not rejected. The inference drawn is that, there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the influence of formal business clustering on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria.

Research Question 2: What is the perceived influence of informal business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south geo-political zone, Nigeria?

Table 3: Mean Ratings of managers and Accountant on the perceived Influence of Informal Business Networking on Performance of SMEs in South-South Nigeria

S/N	Item Statements	Managers N = 174			Accountants N = 196			Total Respondents N =370		
		$\bar{X}_1$	SD_1	DEC$_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	SD_2	DEC$_2$	$\bar{X}$	SD	DEC
1	SMEs regularly evaluate the strength as well as depth of relationships by shared experiences	2.98	0.78	A	2.95	0.81	A	2.97	0.80	A
2	SMEs within informal network review the extent to which the SMEs gains recognition within its industry or community through informal networking.	2.89	0.80	A	2.90	0.81	A	2.90	0.81	A

3	SME measures the level of synergy with shared goals among businesses within the informal network.	2.92	0.75	A	2.90	0.77	A	2.91	0.76	A
4	SMEs within informal network appraise how well SMEs within the network adapt to market changes based on informal information received.	2.83	0.76	A	2.83	0.76	A	2.83	0.76	A
5	SMEs within informal network track the number of customers acquired through word-of-mouth recommendations.	3.04	0.76	A	3.05	0.76	A	3.05	0.76	A
6	SMEs within informal network evaluate the effectiveness of time spent on informal networking in terms of business outcomes.	2.97	0.73	A	2.93	0.73	A	2.95	0.73	A
7	SMEs managers assess how well to adapt to communication along with networking strategies to informal platforms, such as social media or online forums.	2.97	0.70	A	2.93	0.72	A	2.95	0.71	A
8	SMEs measures the levels of exposure to learning opportunities/mentorship as well as gained through informal connections	2.90	0.80	A	2.88	0.80	A	2.89	0.80	A
	Cluster	**2.94**	**0.49**	**A**	**2.92**	**0.52**	**A**	**2.93**	**0.51**	**A**

Key: N = Number of respondents, $\bar{X}_1$= mean for managers, SD_1 = Standard Deviation for managers, DEC_1 = Decision for managers, $\bar{X}_2$= mean for accountants, SD_2 = Standard Deviation for accountants, DEC_2 = Decision for accountants

Result on table 5 showed the perceived influence of informal business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south geo-political zone, Nigeria. Result showed that all items have mean ratings of 2.98, 2.89, 2.92, 2.83, 3.04, 2.97, 2.97 and 2.90 with standard deviations of 0.78, 0.80, 0.75, 0.76, 0.76, 0.73, 0.70 and 0.80 respectively for the managers and mean ratings of 2.95, 2.90, 2.90, 2.83, 3.05, 2.93, 2.93 and 2.88with standard deviations of 0.81, 0.81, 0.77, 0.76, 0.76, 0.73, 0.72 and 0.80respectively for accountants. This implies that the following are agreed as the perceived influence of informal business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south, Nigeria by managers and accountants; SMEs regularly evaluate the strength as well as depth of relationships by shared experiences, SMEs within informal network review the extent to which the SMEs gains recognition within its industry or community through informal networking, SME measures the level of synergy with shared goals among businesses within the informal network, SMEs within informal network appraise how well SMEs within the network adapt to market changes based on informal information received, SMEs within informal network track the number of customers acquired through word-of-mouth recommendations, SMEs within informal network evaluate the effectiveness of time spent on informal networking in terms of business outcomes, SMEs managers assess how well to adapt to communication along with networking strategies to informal platforms, such as social media or online forums and SMEs measures the levels of exposure to learning opportunities/mentorship as well as gained through informal connections. The cluster means of 2.94 with a standard deviation of 0.49for managers and 2.92 with standard deviation of 0.52 for accountants showed that informal business networking influences the performance of SMEs in south-south, Nigeria.

Research Question 3: What is the perceived influence of International business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south geo-political zone, Nigeria?

Table 5: **Mean Ratings of Managers and Accountant on the perceived Influence of International Business Networking on Performance of SMEs in South-South Nigeria**

S/N	Item Statements	Managers N = 174	Accountants N = 196	Total Respondents N =370

		$\bar{X}_1$	SD_1	DEC$_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	SD_2	DEC$_2$	$\bar{X}$	SD	DEC
1	SMEs managers appraise the extent to which the SMEs has established connections in strategic international markets.	2.68	0.92	A	2.63	1.02	A	2.66	0.97	A
2	SMEs Periodically evaluate the success rate of establishing a presence in international markets via measuring the efficiency in entering new international markets.	2.60	0.88	A	2.36	0.85	A	2.48	0.87	A
3	Regularly evaluate the ability of the SMEs to adapt to different cultural business environments	2.91	0.91	A	3.08	0.94	A	3.00	0.93	A
4	Track the growth in international trade activities facilitated by the networking initiatives by assessing the diversity of international suppliers and customers.	2.78	0.85	A	2.94	0.81	A	2.86	0.83	A
5	Assess language skills communication capabilities in the context of international networking	2.86	0.89	A	2.87	0.98	A	2.87	0.94	A
6	SMEs evaluate how well it has adhered to business regulations.	2.71	0.77	A	2.56	0.79	A	2.64	0.78	A
7	Evaluate the strategies in place to mitigate risks associated with economic fluctuations	2.78	0.87	A	2.79	0.97	A	2.79	0.92	A

	in different countries by assess the resilience of the SME's supply chain in the face of global disruptions.									
8	Track the contribution of international business networking to the overall revenue of the SME by assessing the return on investment in international networking activities.	2.84	0.87	A	2.82	0.90	A	2.83	0.89	A
	Cluster	**2.77**	**0.53**	**A**	**2.76**	**0.52**	**A**	**2.77**	**0.53**	**A**

Key: N = Number of respondents, $\bar{X}_1$= mean for managers, SD_1 = Standard Deviation for managers, DEC_1 = Decision for managers, $\bar{X}_2$= mean for accountants, SD_2 = Standard Deviation for accountants, DEC_2 = Decision for accountants.

Result on table 5 showed the perceived influence of international business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south geo-political zone, Nigeria. Result showed that all items have mean ratings of 2.68, 2.60, 2.91, 2.78, 2.86, 2.71, 2.78 and 2.84 with standard deviations of 0.92, 0.88, 0.91, 0.85, 0.89, 0.77, 0.87 and 0.87 respectively for the managers and mean ratings of 2.63, 2.36, 3.08, 2.94, 2.87, 2.56, 2.79 and 2.82with standard deviations of 1.02, 0.85, 0.94, 0.81, 0.98, 0.79, 0.97 and 0.90 respectively for accountants. This implies that the following are agreed as the perceived influence of international business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south, Nigeria by managers and accountants; SMEs managers appraise the extent to which the SMEs has established connections in strategic international markets, SMEs Periodically evaluate the success rate of establishing a presence in international markets via measuring the efficiency in entering new international markets, regularly evaluate the ability of the SMEs to adapt to different cultural business environments, Track the growth in international trade activities facilitated by the networking initiatives by assessing the diversity of international suppliers and customers, assess language skills communication capabilities in the context of international networking, SMEs evaluate how well it has adhere to business regulations, evaluate the strategies in place to mitigate risks associated with economic fluctuations in different countries by assess the resilience of the SME's supply chain in the face of global disruptions and track the contribution of international business networking to the overall revenue of the SME by assessing the return on investment in international networking activities. The cluster mean of 2.77 with a standard deviation of 0.53for managers and 2.76 with standard deviation of 0.52 for accountants showed

that international business networking perceived influences the performance of SMEs in south-south geo-political zone, Nigeria.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of Managers and Accountants on the perceived influence of international business networking on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria**.**

Table 6: T-test Analysis of the Mean Ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the* perceived *Influence of International Business Clustering on Performance of SMEs in South-South States Nigeria. ***Managers* = 174, *Accountants* = 196**

		Manager		*Accountant*					
S/N	**Item Statement**	$\bar{x}$	**SD**	$\bar{x}$	**SD**	**t-value**	**Df**	**Sig**	**Dec.**
1	SMEs managers appraise the extent to which the SMEs has established connections in strategic international markets.	2.68	0.92	2.63	1.02	-.723	368	.470	NS
2	SMEs Periodically evaluate the success rate of establishing a presence in international markets via measuring the efficiency in entering new international markets.	2.60	0.88	2.36	0.85	-1.748	368	.081	NS
3	Regularly evaluate the ability of the SMEs to adapt to different cultural business environments	2.91	0.91	3.08	0.94	-1.428	368	.154	NS
4	Track the growth in international trade activities facilitated by the networking	2.78	0.85	2.94	0.81	1.542	368	.124	NS

	initiatives by assessing the diversity of international suppliers and customers.								
5	Assess language skills communication capabilities in the context of international networking	2.86	0.89	2.87	0.98	1.327	368	.185	NS
6	SMEs evaluate how well it has adhere to business regulations.	2.71	0.77	2.56	0.79	1.484	368	.147	NS
7	Evaluate the strategies in place to mitigate risks associated with economic fluctuations in different countries by assess the resilience of the SME's supply chain in the face of global disruptions.	2.78	0.87	2.79	0.97	1.121	368	263	NS
8	Track the contribution of international business networking to the overall revenue of the SME by assessing the return on investment in international networking activities	2.84	0.87	.82	0.90	1.854	368	.065	NS
	Cluster	2.77	0.53	2.76	0.52	.189	368	.850	**NS**

Key: N = Number of respondents, $\bar{X}_1$= mean for managers, SD_1 = Standard Deviation for managers, DEC_1 = Decision for managers, $\bar{X}_2$= mean for accountants, SD_2 = Standard Deviation for accountants, DEC_2 = Decision for accountants, S= significant, NS=not significant

Result on Table 16 is a t-test analysis of the difference between the mean ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on perceived influence of international business clustering on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria. Result shows that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of Managers and Accountants on all the items. A cluster t-value of 0.19 with a degree of freedom of 368 and a significant or probability value of 0.85 were obtained. Since the probability value of 0.85 is greater than 0.05 level of significance (P>0.05). This means that hypothesis eight (8) which stated that; there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the influence of international business clustering on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria, is not rejected. The inference drawn is that, there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the influence of international business clustering on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria.

4.0 Discussions of findings

4.1 The Influence the Influence of Formal

Business Networking on Performance of SMEs in South-South Nigeria

Result presented in Table 1 showed that the perceived influence of formal business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south, Nigeria includes; SMEs within the formal network gather feedback from clients through networking channels to assess satisfaction levels, SMEs within the formal network easily track the attendance of SME representatives at formal networking events through conferences/seminars, among others. And table 12 in the test of hypothesis 6 revealed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the influence of formal business clustering on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria. The finding of the study is consistent with the findings of Ogunnaike and Kehinde (2020) examined formal networking and business performance: The case of selected entrepreneurs in Ota, Nigeria and found that that electronic business network has significant effect on sales turnover in Nigeria. The finding is also in line with that of Adudu, Indyer and Abdulazeez (2021) whose findings showed that all business networks have a positive and significant effect on the performance of SMEs in Benue State, Nigeria.

The Influence of Informal Business Networking on Performance of SMEs in South-South Nigeria

Result presented in Table 3 showed that the perceived influence of informal business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south, Nigeria include; SMEs regularly evaluate the strength as well as depth of relationships by shared experiences, SMEs within informal network review the extent to which the SMEs gains recognition within its industry or community through informal networking, SME measures the level of synergy with shared goals among businesses within the informal network among others. And table 13 in the test of

hypothesis 7 revealed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the influence of informal business networking on performance of in SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria. The finding of the study is consistent with the findings of Olufemi (2020) whose findings showed that there is a positive influence of informal business networking on SME in Nigeria.

The Influence of International business networking on Performance of SMEs in South-South Nigeria

Result presented in Table 5 showed that the perceived influence of international business networking on performance of SMEs in south-south, Nigeria includes; SMEs managers appraise the extent to which the SMEs has established connections in strategic international markets, SMEs Periodically evaluate the success rate of establishing a presence in international markets via measuring the efficiency in entering new international markets, among others. And in the test of hypothesis 8 in table 16 it revealed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of SMEs Managers and Accountants on the influence of international business clustering on performance of SMEs in South-South States of Nigeria. The finding of the study is consistent with the findings of Leevi (2021) found that international business networking has great influence on SMEs. The findings of their study provide evidence of significant influence of innovation capability in the informal sector in Nigeria. The finding is also in line with that of Taha and Malin (2020) whose findings showed that Networks play a crucial role and are a key factor in helping SMEs. Rocha and Sternberg (2023) found that SMEs in clusters benefit from enhanced access to information and resources, which significantly impacts their innovation capabilities and performance. Bell (2022) highlights that SMEs in clusters tend to have higher innovation rates due to closer interaction with suppliers, customers, and competitors, fostering a more collaborative environment conducive to innovation. Martin and Sunley (2021) caution against viewing clusters as a universal solution for SME performance enhancement. They argue that the effectiveness of clusters vary greatly depending on the sector, the level of trust and collaboration among businesses, and external economic conditions. Molina-Morales and Martínez-Fernández (2019) found that local clustering is beneficial, SMEs need to develop networks beyond local clusters to access diverse resources and knowledge, suggesting a balanced approach to networking. Iansiti and Lakhani (2020) argue that digital technologies enable SMEs to participate in global networks, accessing knowledge, resources, and markets previously beyond their reach, highlighting the evolving nature of networking. The discussion above integrates theoretical insights and empirical findings to highlight the complex but generally positive influence of business clustering and networking on SME performance. These strategies offer pathways to enhanced innovation, access to resources, and market expansion. However, the variability in outcomes and

the importance of strategic engagement with both local and broader networks underscore the need for SMEs to adopt a nuanced approach to leveraging clustering and networking for business success.

5.0 Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made.

- ✓ Government should facilitate regular meetings between managers and accountants to discuss and align their perspectives on geographic, value chain, and innovation clustering. This can help in understanding the unique insights each group brings and formulating a cohesive strategy.
- ✓ Government should organize workshops that include both managers and accountants to jointly explore the benefits and implementation strategies for these types of clustering.
- ✓ Managers and accountants of SMEs should facilitate the sharing of best practices and success stories within these clustering types, helping SMEs to learn from each other and replicate successful strategies.
- ✓ Managers and accountants of SMEs should Offer continuous professional development opportunities focusing on the unique aspects and benefits of industrial and agricultural clustering. This can include sector-specific workshops, seminars, and courses.
- ✓ Managers and accountants of SMEs should conduct ongoing research to continuously assess the impact of different clustering strategies on SME performance. This research can provide valuable insights and inform future strategies and policies

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