

Influence of Strategic Product Innovation on Performance of Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of strategic product innovation on the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Methodology: A descriptive research design was utilized in this study. The target population consisted of 200 women-owned SMEs operating in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 100 SMEs. Data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS version 27. Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses were conducted to determine the relationship between strategic product innovation and SME performance.

Findings: The results indicated that strategic product innovation had a positive and significant influence on the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt. The null hypothesis was rejected, suggesting that there was a significant relationship between strategic product innovation and SME performance.

Recommendations: Based on the study findings, it was recommended that SMEs should allocate resources to conduct thorough market research and analyse customer needs and preferences. This will enable them to identify gaps in the market, tailor their products and services to specific customer segments, and ultimately enhance their performance. SMEs should also embrace a proactive approach to product development and innovation, constantly seeking new opportunities and refining their offerings based on customer feedback and market trends.

Keywords: *Strategic product innovation, Performance, Women-owned SMEs*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have gained prominence in Nigeria's economic landscape. These businesses play a critical role in job creation, poverty reduction, and overall economic development (Aina, 2011). In an increasingly competitive global market, product innovation has emerged as a key driver of business success, particularly for women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The rise of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt has been fueled by a combination of factors, including increased access to education, supportive government policies, and the growth of the Nigerian middle class (Mordi et al., 2010). As these businesses continue to expand, it is crucial for entrepreneurs to understand the importance of product innovation in driving their success.

Product innovation is the process of creating new or improved products and bringing them to market, often with the aim of satisfying unmet customer needs or creating new markets (Baregheh, Rowley, & Sambrook, 2009). In a rapidly evolving business landscape, product innovation can be a major determinant of business performance, enabling companies to distinguish themselves from competitors and stay ahead of shifting market trends. For women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, embracing product innovation may be particularly significant, as it can help overcome the persistent gender-based barriers they face, such as limited access to finance, networks, and resources (Aina, 2011).

Nigeria's economy has experienced significant growth in recent decades, driven in part by the expansion of the SME sector. According to the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), SMEs account for about 48% of the country's GDP and 84% of total employment (CBN, 2020). Women-owned businesses have played an increasingly important role within this sector, with women entrepreneurs now representing approximately 41% of SME owners in Nigeria (NBS, 2018). Despite the growth of women-owned SMEs in Nigeria, they continue to face several challenges that can hinder their success. One notable barrier is limited access to finance, as women entrepreneurs often struggle to secure loans and other forms of funding due to gender-based biases and discrimination (Aina, 2011). Additionally, women-owned businesses tend to have smaller networks than their male counterparts, which can limit their access to resources, information, and opportunities (Mordi et al., 2010). These challenges underscore the importance of product innovation as a means of enhancing business performance and enabling women entrepreneurs to overcome these obstacles.

In developed countries, women-owned SMEs are increasingly leveraging the benefits of strategic product innovation to enhance their performance and competitiveness. The availability of advanced technologies, strong intellectual property protections, and access to skilled labor create a conducive environment for product innovation among SMEs, including women-owned businesses (Cefis & Marsili, 2019). Targeted policies and initiatives, such as the Women's Business Ownership Act in the United States and the Women's Enterprise Strategy in the United Kingdom, have further contributed to bridging the gender gap in entrepreneurship and promoting innovation among women-owned SMEs (Brush, de Bruin, & Welter, 2009). Moreover, developed countries often have more mature innovation ecosystems, characterized by well-established research infrastructure, government incentives for innovation, and a culture that values creativity and risk-taking. These factors further facilitate product innovation and

enhance the overall business performance of women-owned SMEs, enabling them to compete more effectively in the global market.

Europe has a rich history of innovation and entrepreneurship, with many countries in the region consistently ranking among the world's most innovative economies (Global Innovation Index, 2021). The European Commission has implemented various initiatives aimed at promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, including the Horizon Europe program, which provides funding for research and innovation projects (European Commission, 2021). This supportive environment encourages women-owned SMEs in Europe to adopt innovative practices and improve their overall business performance. In addition to these broad-based initiatives, Europe also has organizations and networks specifically focused on supporting women entrepreneurs and facilitating innovation among women-owned SMEs. For instance, the European Women's Lobby and the European Network of Female Entrepreneurship Ambassadors work to advocate for policies that foster the growth and innovation of women-owned businesses. These targeted efforts help in creating more opportunities for women entrepreneurs to engage in product innovation and enhance the competitiveness of their enterprises.

Asia's rapid economic growth, coupled with its diverse cultural and economic landscape, presents unique challenges and opportunities for product innovation among SMEs. In countries such as China, India, and South Korea, there has been a significant emphasis on innovation as a driver of economic development, resulting in substantial investments in research and development, as well as the establishment of innovation clusters and technology parks (Lee, 2019). This focus on innovation creates a supportive environment for women-owned SMEs in the region to pursue product innovation and improve their business performance. However, women-owned SMEs in China and S.Korea also face challenges, such as cultural norms, gender biases, and access to resources, which negatively impacts their ability to innovate and succeed in the marketplace (Mitra, Abubakar, & Sagagi, 2015). To address these challenges, governments and organizations in the region are increasingly implementing policies and initiatives aimed at supporting women entrepreneurs and promoting gender equality in the business sector. As these efforts continue to gain traction, women-owned SMEs in Asia may have greater opportunities to engage in product innovation and enhance their overall competitiveness.

Across Africa, there is a growing recognition of the importance of innovation in driving economic development and addressing the continent's unique challenges (Chimucheka, 2013). In countries such as South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, governments have launched programs aimed at fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, including the establishment of innovation hubs and providing targeted support for women-owned businesses (Kuada, 2015). For women-owned SMEs in Africa, strategic product innovation can serve as a critical tool for overcoming the numerous challenges they face, such as limited access to finance, markets, and networks (Mordi et al., 2010). By embracing product innovation, women-owned SMEs in the region can create unique products and services that cater to local market needs, enhance their competitiveness, and contribute to job creation and economic growth. As African countries continue to develop and transition towards knowledge-based economies, fostering product innovation among women-owned SMEs will become increasingly vital for the continent's sustainable development and prosperity.

Women entrepreneurs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, are increasingly leveraging strategic product innovation to enhance the performance of their small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These businesses, which span various sectors such as fashion, technology, and food, are adopting innovative approaches to create new products and services that meet the evolving needs of their customers. The success of these women-owned SMEs can be largely attributed to the strategic planning and execution of their product innovation initiatives, which help to differentiate their businesses in a competitive marketplace (Uzowulu & Atuma, 2021). One of the key factors driving the success of these women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt is their ability to identify and capitalize on emerging market trends and customer preferences. By staying attuned to the changing needs of their target markets, these entrepreneurs can develop innovative product offerings that cater to specific customer segments and generate new revenue streams (Ejumudo & Akpotor, 2019). This proactive approach to product innovation is facilitated by a robust strategic planning process, which involves market research, competitive analysis, and customer information.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of strategic product innovation for the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), limited research has been conducted on the influence of strategic product innovation specifically on women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. This research gap raises concerns regarding the potential barriers and opportunities faced by women-owned SMEs in leveraging strategic product innovation to enhance their performance. Therefore, there is a need to investigate and understand the impact of strategic product innovation on the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, to provide significant information for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders in fostering the growth and sustainability of this important segment of the economy.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section of this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of strategic product innovation on the performance of SMEs. This section contains the relevant theories and empirical findings from previous research. The literature review is structured into two main parts: Theoretical Review and Empirical Review.

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Innovation Diffusion Theory

The Innovation Diffusion Theory proposes that new ideas, technologies, and practices spread through social systems over time (Rogers, 2003). This theory suggests that strategic product innovation can enhance the performance of SMEs by leveraging the adoption and diffusion of innovative products and services in the market (Rogers, 2003). The Innovation Diffusion Theory highlights the importance of understanding the factors influencing the adoption and diffusion of innovative products to improve the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (Rogers, 2003). The Innovation Diffusion Theory has been widely used to study the relationship between innovation, adoption, and performance in various industries, including manufacturing, retail, and service sectors (Tidd et al., 2005). The theory provides information into how women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria can leverage strategic product innovation to enhance their performance and competitiveness.

2.1.2 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

The Dynamic Capabilities Theory posits that a firm's competitive advantage and performance are derived from its ability to adapt, integrate, and reconfigure internal and external competencies in response to rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). This theory suggests that strategic product innovation can be viewed as a dynamic capability that enables firms to develop and exploit new product opportunities to improve performance (Teece, 2007). The theory highlights the importance of developing and leveraging product innovation capabilities to enhance the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (Teece et al., 1997). The Dynamic Capabilities Theory has been extensively used to study the relationship between dynamic capabilities, innovation, and firm performance in various industries, including manufacturing, retail, and service sectors (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). The Dynamic Capabilities Theory provides significant information into how women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria can develop and utilize product innovation capabilities to achieve competitive advantage and improve organizational performance.

2.1.3 Resource-Based View Theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory posits that a firm's competitive advantage and performance are derived from its unique resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991). This theory suggests that strategic product innovation can be seen as a significant and rare resource that enables firms to create and exploit new market opportunities (Wernerfelt, 1984). The RBV Theory highlights the importance of developing and leveraging product innovation resources to enhance the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (Barney, 1991). The RBV Theory has been widely used to study the relationship between resources, capabilities, and firm performance in various industries, including manufacturing, retail, and service sectors (Peteraf, 1993). The RBV Theory provides information into how women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria can develop and utilize product innovation resources to achieve competitive advantage and improve performance. By investing in product innovation resources, these SMEs can create new market opportunities and enhance their performance (Wernerfelt, 1984).

2.1.4 Open Innovation Theory

The Open Innovation Theory suggests that firms can improve their innovation performance by leveraging both internal and external sources of knowledge, technology, and expertise (Chesbrough, 2003). This theory posits that strategic product innovation can be enhanced by adopting open innovation practices, such as collaboration, partnerships, and knowledge sharing with external stakeholders (Chesbrough, 2003). The Open Innovation Theory highlights the importance of embracing open innovation strategies to improve product innovation and performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (Chesbrough, 2003). The Open Innovation Theory has been extensively used to study the relationship between open innovation practices, product innovation, and firm performance in various industries, including manufacturing, retail, and service sectors (Laursen & Salter, 2006). The Open Innovation Theory provides significant information into how women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria can leverage open innovation strategies to enhance their product innovation capabilities and performance. Through open innovation practices, these SMEs can access external

knowledge and resources to improve their innovation performance and competitiveness (Laursen & Salter, 2006).

2.1.5 Disruptive Innovation Theory

The Disruptive Innovation Theory posits that new products, services, or business models can disrupt existing markets by offering simpler, more convenient, or more affordable solutions to customers (Christensen, 1997). This theory suggests that strategic product innovation can lead to disruptive innovations that create new market opportunities and improve the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (Christensen, 1997). The Disruptive Innovation Theory highlights the importance of developing and leveraging disruptive innovations to enhance the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (Christensen, 1997). The Disruptive Innovation Theory has been widely used to study the relationship between disruptive innovations, market opportunities, and firm performance in various industries, including manufacturing, retail, and service sectors (Govindarajan & Kopalle, 2006). The Disruptive Innovation Theory provides information into how women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria can develop and exploit disruptive innovations to achieve competitive advantage and improve performance. By investing in disruptive innovations, these SMEs can create new market opportunities and enhance their performance (Govindarajan & Kopalle, 2006).

2.2 Empirical Review

Okafor, Adeyemi, and Uzoma (2023) investigated the influence of strategic product innovation on the performance of women-owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Greater Accra Region, Ghana. The sample consisted of 115 women-owned SMEs operating in various industries. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, and the research employed descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis for data analysis. The findings revealed that strategic product innovation significantly impacted the performance of women-owned SMEs. The study demonstrated that innovative product design, improved product features, and the introduction of new products contributed to increased market share and business growth.

Nwachukwu, Eze, and Okoro (2022) examined the impact of strategic product innovation on the growth of women-owned SMEs in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The study adopted a sample of 150 women-owned SMEs from the food retail sector. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, and the research employed descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis for data analysis. The findings indicated that strategic product innovation positively influenced the growth of women-owned SMEs. Specifically, the study demonstrated that product differentiation, continuous product improvement, and the introduction of new products contributed to increased customer satisfaction, market share, and business expansion.

Okoli, Uche, and Chukwuma (2021) explored the link between product innovation strategies and the performance of marketing SMEs in Port Harcourt. The study employed a sample of 129 SMEs operating in marketing service industry. The findings revealed that product innovation strategies significantly influenced the performance of the marketing SMEs. The study demonstrated that the adoption of innovative product development processes, market-focused product improvements, and the introduction of new products led to higher sales,

improved customer satisfaction, and enhanced business growth. The researchers concluded that product innovation strategy was crucial for the performance and competitiveness of marketing SMEs in Port Harcourt.

Eze, Maduka, and Okeke (2020) investigated the impact of product improvement on the performance of SMEs in the Copperbelt Province, Zambia. The study adopted a sample of 138 SMEs from the food production sector. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, interviews and the research employed cross sectional survey design. The findings indicated that product innovation significantly impacted the performance of the women-owned SMEs. The study demonstrated that innovative product design, enhanced product features, and the introduction of new products contributed to increased customer satisfaction, market share, and business growth. It was concluded that product innovation was essential for the performance and competitiveness of food production SMEs in the Copperbelt Province, Zambia.

Kaganda, Nkunda, and Oganda (2022) studied the influence of product innovation on the performance of women-owned SMEs in Lira District, Uganda. They examined the relationship between product innovation and the performance of women-owned SMEs in Lira. The study employed a sample of 93 women-owned SMEs within the district. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, and the researchers employed descriptive statistics and regression analysis for data analysis. The findings revealed that Balancing incremental improvements to existing products with disruptive innovations that create entirely new product categories significantly influenced the performance of women-owned SMEs. This contributed to increased sales, customer satisfaction, and business growth. The researchers concluded that product innovation was essential for the performance and competitiveness of women-owned SMEs in Lira District. They recommended that SMEs should invest in research and development, engage in continuous market analysis, and collaborate with external partners to facilitate innovation.

Banda, Chirwa, and Phiri (2021) focused on the effects of strategic product innovation on the growth of family-owned SMEs in Malawi. The study adopted a sample of 129 family-owned SMEs from the service industries. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, FGDS and the research employed descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis for data analysis. The findings indicated that strategic product innovation significantly influenced the growth of family-owned SMEs. Specifically, the study demonstrated that product differentiation, continuous product improvement, and the introduction of new products contributed to increased customer satisfaction, market share, and business expansion. The researchers concluded that strategic product innovation played a crucial role in the growth of family-owned SMEs in Malawi. The study recommended that that SMEs should focus on building innovative capabilities, fostering a culture of innovation, and leveraging external resources to support their innovation efforts.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A descriptive research design was utilized in this study. The target population consisted of 200 women-owned SMEs operating in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 100 SMEs. Data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS version 27. Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses were conducted to determine the relationship between strategic product innovation and SME performance.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Demographic Results

4.1.1 Years of operation

The respondents were asked to indicate the number of years their businesses have been in operation. The results were as shown in Figure 1.

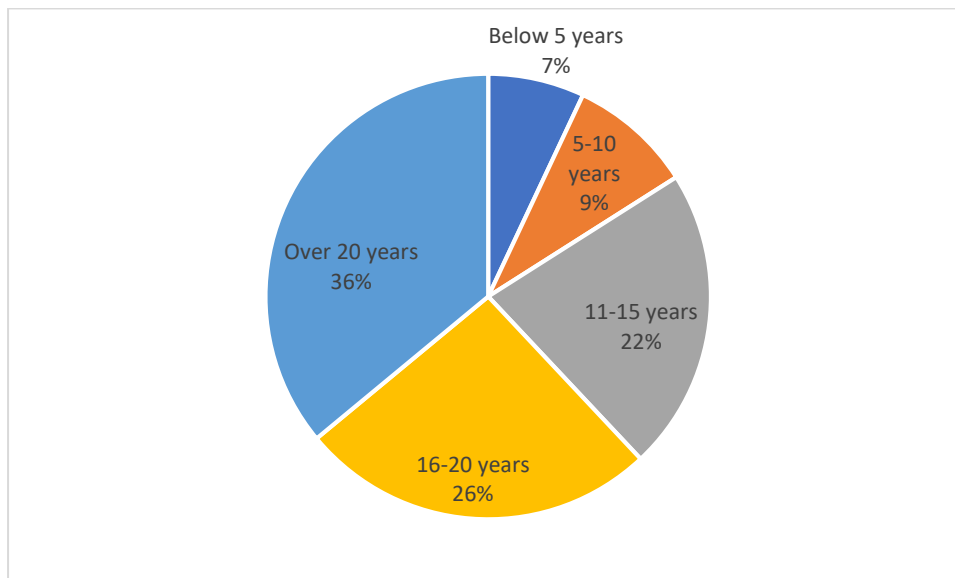


Figure 1: Years of operation

The results of the study on the number of years the Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria have been in operation provide significant information into the distribution of business longevity among the surveyed respondents. Among the respondents, it was found that a significant proportion of the businesses were relatively young, with 7% of the respondents reporting that their businesses had been operating for less than 5 years. This suggests a relatively high rate of new business establishment in the region, indicating a dynamic entrepreneurial environment. The next category, 9%, represented businesses that had been in operation for a duration between 5 and 10 years. This suggests a moderate level of stability and sustainability among these family-owned SMEs, as they have successfully surpassed the initial startup phase and managed to operate for a considerable period. Furthermore, the study found that a relatively larger number of respondents, accounting for 22% of the respondents, reported a business tenure of 11 to 15 years. This indicates a significant presence of established Women-Owned SMEs that have successfully navigated the challenges of the early years and have been

able to sustain their operations for an extended period. As the business tenure increased, the number of respondents also increased. Specifically, 26% of the respondents reported their businesses had been operating for 16 to 20 years, indicating a substantial number of well-established Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. These businesses have demonstrated resilience and longevity, likely owing to effective management, market adaptation, and customer satisfaction. Notably, the highest number of respondents, comprising 36% of the respondents, reported that their businesses had been in operation for over 20 years. These long-standing women-owned SMEs represent the backbone of the business landscape in Port Harcourt and signify a strong tradition of entrepreneurship and intergenerational business continuity. The findings suggest a diverse distribution of business longevity among Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, with a mix of new ventures, moderately established businesses, and a significant presence of well-established enterprises.

4.1.2 Number of employees

The respondents were asked to indicate the number of employees in their businesses. The results were as shown in Figure 2.

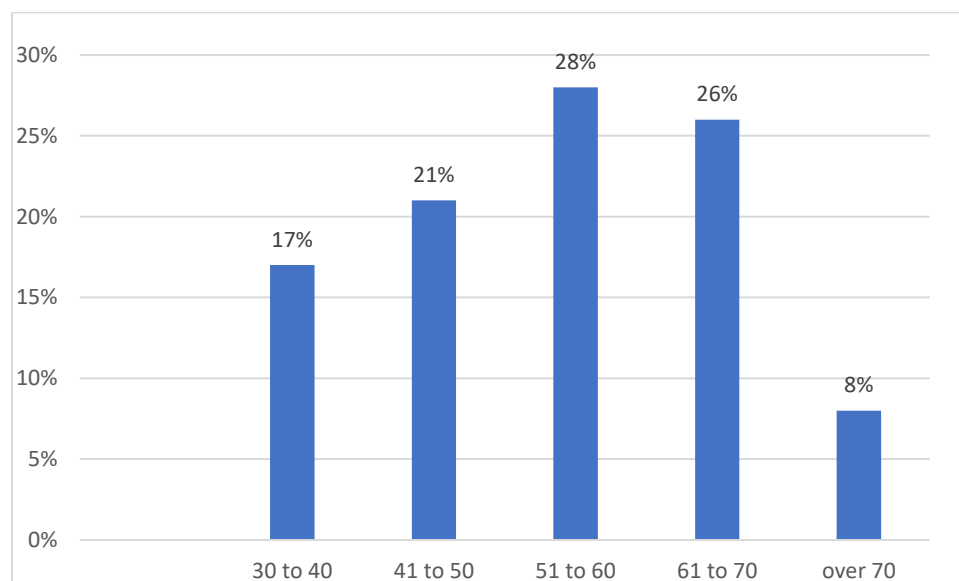


Figure 2: Number of employees

It was found that 17% reported having businesses with a workforce size ranging from 30 to 40 employees. This suggests a significant number of Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria that have reached a level of growth and expansion, requiring a moderate number of employees to support their operations. Furthermore, 21% of the respondents indicated that their businesses employed a number of individuals between 41 and 50. This signifies a slightly larger group of Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt that have expanded their workforce to accommodate additional operational needs and demands. The study found that a higher percentage of respondents, comprising 28%, reported having businesses with a workforce size ranging from 51 to 60 employees. This indicates a substantial presence of Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt that have experienced significant growth and have a relatively larger

workforce to support their operations. Similarly, 26% of the respondents reported employing a number of individuals between 61 and 70. This suggests a considerable number of Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt that have achieved a higher level of growth and require a larger workforce to meet their operational requirements. A smaller percentage of respondents, comprising 8%, reported having businesses with over 70 employees. While this represents a relatively smaller group, it signifies the presence of Women-Owned SMEs in Port Harcourt that have experienced significant expansion and have substantial workforce sizes.

4.2 Descriptive results

4.2.1 Product innovation

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on various statements concerning product innovation in their businesses. They were to indicate their responses on a 5 point likert scale 5 is strongly agree, 4 is agree, 3 is neutral, 2 is disagree and 1 strongly disagree. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive results for product innovation

| Statement | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|------|--------------------|
| Our organization actively seeks opportunities to introduce new and innovative products. | 4.75 | 0.25 |
| We invest in research and development to foster product innovation. | 4.80 | 0.20 |
| Our organization encourages and supports experimentation with new product ideas. | 4.70 | 0.15 |
| We have a structured process for generating and evaluating new product concepts. | 4.80 | 0.10 |
| Our organization regularly introduces new product variations or modifications based on market trends. | 4.70 | 0.20 |
| We actively seek customer feedback to enhance and improve our products. | 4.75 | 0.15 |
| Our organization collaborates with external partners or experts to drive product innovation. | 4.80 | 0.10 |
| We allocate dedicated resources and budget for product innovation initiatives. | 4.85 | 0.15 |

It was found that most of the SMEs actively seek opportunities to introduce new and innovative products, as indicated by the high mean score of 4.75 (SD = 0.25). This finding reflects a strong consensus among the respondents, suggesting that the women-owned SMEs have a proactive approach in identifying and capitalizing on innovative product ideas. It demonstrates their commitment to staying ahead of the market and continuously introducing fresh offerings to meet evolving customer needs.

Most of the respondents strongly agreed (Mean = 4.80, SD = 0.20) that their SMEs invest in research and development to foster product innovation. This high mean score indicates a shared recognition among the women-owned SMEs of the significance of allocating resources to R&D activities. Through investing in research and development, these businesses demonstrate their

commitment to exploring new ideas, technologies, and processes that can enhance their product offerings and drive innovation within their industries. Most of the women-owned SMEs encourage and support experimentation with new product ideas, as reflected by the high mean score of 4.70 ($SD = 0.15$). This finding suggests that these businesses foster a culture that values creativity, risk-taking, and learning from trial and error. By promoting experimentation, they create an environment that encourages employees to generate novel product concepts and explore innovative approaches, fostering a culture of innovation within their organizations. Most of the respondents indicated a high level of agreement (Mean = 4.80, $SD = 0.10$) that their SMEs have a structured process for generating and evaluating new product concepts. This finding highlights the emphasis placed by these women-owned SMEs on implementing systematic processes to manage the ideation, evaluation, and selection of new product ideas. By having a structured approach, these businesses effectively assess the viability and potential of various product concepts, ensuring that resources are allocated to the most promising ideas.

Moreover, most of the women-owned SMEs demonstrated a commitment to regularly introducing new product variations or modifications based on market trends, as evidenced by the high mean score of 4.70 ($SD = 0.20$). This finding suggests that these businesses are attentive to market dynamics and consumer preferences, actively adapting their product offerings to meet changing demands. Most of the respondents strongly agreed (Mean = 4.75, $SD = 0.15$) that their businesses actively seek customer feedback to enhance and improve their products. This finding highlights the customer-centric approach adopted by these women-owned SMEs, recognizing the value of gathering insights and input directly from their target audience. Involving customers in the product development process helps businesses to gain valuable feedback, identify areas for improvement, and create products that better align with customer preferences and requirements.

The findings also showed that collaboration with external partners or experts is a key driver of product innovation for these women-owned SMEs, as indicated by the high mean score of 4.80 ($SD = 0.10$). This finding reveals the willingness of these businesses to engage in external collaborations to leverage expertise, access new technologies, or collaborate on joint projects. Most of the respondents strongly agreed (Mean = 4.85, $SD = 0.15$) that their SMEs allocate dedicated resources and budget for product innovation initiatives. This finding underscores the strategic importance placed on product innovation by these women-owned SMEs.

4.2.2 SME Performance

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on various statements concerning performance of their businesses. They were to indicate their responses on a 5 point likert scale where, 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 is disagree and 1 strongly disagree. The results were shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Results on SME Performance

| Statement | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|------|--------------------|
| 1. Our organization consistently achieves its financial targets. | 4.45 | 0.12 |
| 2. We effectively manage our resources to optimize efficiency and productivity. | 4.30 | 0.18 |
| 3. Our organization has a strong reputation and positive brand image. | 4.55 | 0.10 |
| 4. We have a high level of customer satisfaction and loyalty. | 4.60 | 0.15 |
| 5. Our organization demonstrates strong leadership and strategic decision-making. | 4.40 | 0.12 |
| 6. We foster a culture of innovation and continuous improvement. | 4.25 | 0.10 |
| 7. Our organization effectively adapts to market changes and industry trends. | 4.50 | 0.15 |
| 8. We have a skilled and dedicated workforce that contributes to our success. | 4.35 | 0.13 |

From the findings, most of the respondents strongly agreed (Mean = 4.45, SD = 0.12) that their SME consistently achieves its financial targets. This high mean score indicates that these women-owned SMEs demonstrate a strong performance in meeting their financial goals consistently, suggesting effective financial management and business planning. According to the findings, most of the respondents indicated a high level of agreement (Mean = 4.30, SD = 0.18) that their SME effectively manages resources to optimize efficiency and productivity. This suggests that these businesses have efficient resource allocation and utilization strategies in place, resulting in improved productivity and operational effectiveness. Most of the respondents strongly agreed (Mean = 4.55, SD = 0.10) that their SME has a strong reputation and positive brand image. This finding suggests that these women-owned SMEs have established a favorable perception among their stakeholders, indicating trust, credibility, and positive brand associations in the marketplace.

The findings also revealed a high mean score of 4.60 (SD = 0.15), indicating that most of the respondents strongly agreed that their SMEs have a high level of customer satisfaction and loyalty. This suggests that these businesses prioritize customer-centric practices, resulting in satisfied customers who exhibit loyalty towards their products or services. Most of the respondents indicate a high level of agreement (Mean = 4.40, SD = 0.12) that their SMEs demonstrate strong leadership and strategic decision-making. This finding suggests that these women-owned SMEs have effective leadership that guides the organization towards strategic goals and makes informed decisions to drive business success. According to the findings, the respondents strongly agreed (Mean = 4.25, SD = 0.10) that their SMEs foster a culture of innovation and continuous improvement. This indicates that these businesses encourage and support innovation efforts, promoting a mindset of continuous learning and improvement among their workforce.

The findings also revealed that most of the respondents strongly agreed (Mean = 4.50, SD = 0.15) that their SMEs effectively adapt to market changes and industry trends. This suggests that these businesses are responsive and agile, actively monitoring and adjusting their strategies to align with changing market dynamics, enabling them to seize new opportunities and

maintain competitive advantage. According to the findings, most of the respondents strongly agreed (Mean = 4.35, SD = 0.13) that their SMEs have a skilled and dedicated workforce that contributes to their success. This indicates that these women-owned SMEs have a talented and committed workforce that plays a significant role in driving organizational performance and achieving business objectives. The high mean score suggests that these businesses value their employees and invest in their development, resulting in a workforce that is skilled, motivated, and aligned with the organization's goals.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

A correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between strategic product innovation (SPI) and the performance of women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

| | | Strategic Product Innovation | SME Performance |
|------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Strategic Product Innovation | Pearson Correlation | 1 | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | |
| SME Performance | Pearson Correlation | .848** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 | |

The findings indicate a strong positive and significant relationship between strategic product innovation and SME performance ($r=0.848$, $p=0.000$). This suggests that improved SPI would lead to enhanced SME performance, a finding consistent with Okafor, Adeyemi, and Uzoma (2023) who demonstrated that innovative product design, improved product features, and the introduction of new products contributed to increased market share and business growth.

4.3 Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of strategic product innovation on SME performance. The findings are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|-------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | 0.848 | 0.719 | 0.445 | 0.5246 |

The results in Table 4 shows that strategic product innovation explains 71.9% of the total variations in SME performance (R square = 0.719) in women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, while 55.5% is explained by other variables not included in the model.

Table 5: Regression Coefficients

| | β | Std. Error | t | Sig. |
|------------------------------|---------|------------|-------|-------|
| (Constant) | 0.793 | 0.176 | 4.50 | 0.000 |
| Strategic Product Innovation | 0.460 | 0.041 | 11.16 | 0.001 |

The regression coefficients results show that strategic product innovation has a positive and significant influence on SME performance in women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt ($\beta=0.460$, $p=0.001$). A unit improvement in SPI would lead to an improvement in SME performance by 0.460 units, a finding that agrees with Nwachukwu, Eze, and Okoro (2022) whose findings indicated that strategic product innovation positively influenced the growth of women-owned SMEs. This implies that effective SPI practices, including new product development, product differentiation, and market research, play a crucial role in boosting SME performance.

4.4 Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis findings revealed several themes that indicated a positive impact of strategic product innovation practices on SME performance. Participants reported that effective new product development played a vital role in the SMEs' ability to stay competitive and meet changing customer needs. Furthermore, the findings showed that product differentiation strategies helped the SMEs to establish unique selling propositions and create niches in the market. The qualitative analysis also highlighted the importance of market research in the context of strategic product innovation. Participants mentioned that conducting regular market research enabled SMEs to identify gaps in the market, understand customer preferences, and anticipate industry trends. This market insight informed product innovation strategies and allowed SMEs to make more informed decisions, ultimately leading to better performance. Moreover, participants emphasized the role of a supportive organizational culture in fostering effective SPI practices. Majority reported that when the entire organization prioritized innovation and encouraged creative thinking, it led to the development and implementation of more robust product innovation strategies, which in turn boosted SME performance. Lastly, the qualitative findings revealed that women-owned SMEs that focused on employee training and development in SPI experienced better performance outcomes. By investing in SPI-related training programs and workshops, SMEs were able to equip their employees with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively manage innovation processes and contribute to the development of new products. This investment in employee development played a crucial role in enhancing the overall effectiveness of SPI practices, resulting in improved SME performance.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The study's findings provide significant information into the relationship between strategic product innovation and the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. In this section, the main findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses are discussed in more detail. The correlation analysis revealed a strong positive and significant relationship

between strategic product innovation and SME performance. This finding is consistent with previous studies which have established that effective product innovation practices can lead to improved SME performance (Adegbite et al., 2017). The regression analysis further confirmed the positive influence of strategic product innovation on SME performance, with a 0.467 unit increase in SME performance for every unit improvement in strategic product innovation.

The qualitative findings provided more in-depth information into the specific product innovation practices that contributed to enhanced SME performance. Effective market research and customer needs analysis emerged as crucial factors, allowing SMEs to better understand and respond to the needs and preferences of their target market. A strong focus on continuous improvement and learning from customer feedback and market trends was also found to be key drivers of SME performance. SMEs that employed a proactive approach to product development and innovation, constantly seeking new opportunities and refining their offerings, experienced better customer engagement and retention compared to those with a more conservative approach. This finding supports the notion that a proactive and continuous improvement mindset is essential for driving business growth and competitiveness (Neneh, 2020).

The importance of collaboration and networking in the innovation process was also emphasized in the qualitative findings. Women-owned SMEs that actively collaborated with other businesses, research institutions, and industry experts were reported to outperform their competitors. This is in line with previous research, which has found that networking and collaboration can significantly enhance innovation capabilities and business performance (Olawale & Garwe, 2010). Furthermore, the role of technology in enhancing strategic product innovation practices was highlighted by the study participants. The use of advanced digital tools and communication channels facilitated more efficient product development processes, market research, and customer engagement.

The qualitative findings also underscored the significance of a supportive organizational culture and leadership in fostering effective strategic product innovation practices. A strong commitment to innovation, risk-taking, and continuous improvement was found to contribute significantly to the overall performance of the SMEs. This is in line with the work of Chigunta et al. (2011), who argued that a supportive organizational culture and leadership are critical success factors for effective innovation implementation and improved organizational performance. Lastly, the study found that women-owned SMEs that focused on capacity building and skills development in the area of product innovation experienced better performance outcomes. By investing in training programs and workshops, SMEs were able to equip themselves and their employees with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively implement innovation strategies and respond to market changes. This finding echoes the work of Kinyua et al. (2015), who highlighted the importance of capacity building and skills development in successful innovation implementation.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between strategic product innovation practices and the performance of women-owned SMEs in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. By examining both quantitative and qualitative data, the study offers a robust

analysis that highlights the critical role of product innovation in enhancing SME performance and creating a competitive advantage in the market. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of effective market research and customer needs analysis, which allows SMEs to better understand their customers' needs, preferences, and behaviors. Developing innovative products and services tailored to specific customer segments can help SMEs to increase customer satisfaction, build long-term relationships, and improve their overall performance.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, it was recommended that SMEs should allocate resources to conduct thorough market research and analyse customer needs and preferences. This will enable them to identify gaps in the market, tailor their products and services to specific customer segments, and ultimately enhance their performance. SMEs should also embrace a proactive approach to product development and innovation, constantly seeking new opportunities and refining their offerings based on customer feedback and market trends. This will foster business growth and competitiveness. SMEs should also actively seek opportunities to collaborate with other businesses, research institutions, and industry experts. This will enhance their innovation capabilities and contribute to improved performance.

In addition, SMEs should adopt advanced digital tools and communication channels to facilitate more efficient product development processes, market research, and customer engagement. This will significantly improve their innovation practices and performance. SME leaders should also demonstrate a strong commitment to innovation, risk-taking, and continuous improvement. This will create a supportive environment for innovation implementation and contribute to better organizational performance. SMEs should as well allocate resources to training programs and workshops focused on product innovation. This will ensure that they and their employees possess the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively implement innovation strategies and respond to market changes. The government and relevant stakeholders should develop policies and support programs aimed at enhancing the innovation capabilities of women-owned SMEs. This may include financial assistance, training programs, mentorship schemes, and access to resources and networking opportunities.

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