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Evaluating The Influence of Networking Strategies on Start-Up Growth: Evidence from Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of networking strategies on the growth trajectory of start-ups in Anambra State, Nigeria. The research aims to determine how networking behaviours such as collaboration, partnerships, and knowledge sharing contribute to business expansion and sustainability. A quantitative research design was adopted, and data were collected from 374 start-up owners and managers across Awka, Nnewi, and Onitsha using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, including correlation and regression, were employed to examine the relationship between networking strategies and start-up growth. Findings reveal that effective networking significantly enhances access to resources, knowledge, and market opportunities, which, in turn, drive innovation, visibility, and business performance. The study concludes that networking serves as a strategic mechanism for sustaining competitive advantage among start-ups. It recommends that entrepreneurs invest in professional networks and mentorship programs, while policymakers create an enabling environment that promotes collaboration and knowledge exchange among start-ups. The study contributes to entrepreneurial literature by empirically validating the role of networking in fostering start-up development in emerging economies.

Keywords: *Networking Strategies, Start-ups, Growth Trajectory, Entrepreneurship, Innovation*

1. Introduction

Start-ups must know that digital transformation is a critical enabler of startup growth and innovation in the digital era, thus understanding the challenges and opportunities inherent in this journey of growth, startups must develop strategies to harness the power of digital technologies and thrive in today's dynamic business environment which will enable them to acknowledge technological advancement role on industrial landscapes, markets trends and consumer behaviour. These understandings are more feasible when proper networking is done. They observed that Start-ups leveraging emerging technologies can help drive innovation and be very advantageous to them. They further advanced that Start-ups must cultivate a culture of flexibility and resilience to swiftly respond to changing market demands, which are made feasible through networking Olorunyomi et al, 2024). Start-ups must also understand that the advent of digital technology has greatly influenced consumer behaviour and market trends, which have reshaped the way businesses engage with their target audiences (Roger, 2016; Olorunyomi et al., 2024). This is so because Start-ups can easily connect with or even larger firms through technology (internet). Leveraging technological advancement, Start-ups can gain deeper insight into consumer preferences and behaviours, which will in turn help tailor their products or services to meet the specific needs of their target audience, hence ensuring customer satisfaction and loyalty, leading to more patronage and growth (Vidhya et al. 2023; Rane, 2023; Kibria et al. 2018; Puntoni et al. 2021). Start-ups operate in a dynamic and uncertain environment where change is constant and unexpected challenges are very common; hence, start-ups should cultivate a culture of flexibility and resilience for navigating uncertainties. Flexibility allows startups to adapt quickly to evolving market conditions, customer preferences and technological advancement in their areas (Olorunyomi et al. 2024; Salmela, et al. 2022; Azra, 2023).

Start-ups need to prioritize the understanding of customer needs, preferences and pain points to create value added solution and to drive home a personalized experience. Networking will enhance collaboration that will drive Start-ups to success. Huggins and Thompson (2015) observed that networks are more than just relationships, which can create strong connections between firms and stakeholders. They emphasized that in the twenty-first century, with globalization, organisations are open to each other and can communicate easily through networking technologies. Kogut (2000) observed that most Start-ups are involved in networking because they generate ideas for coordination, collaboration, and value. It's through the understanding of networking that knowledge involving coordination between specific cooperation and competitive structures is a missing source of value that can be found.

Minhazur et al (2021), writing on how Norwegian Technology Start-ups use open Innovation Strategies to gain access to new business ideas, observed that Start-ups deal with new technological products and services, which potentially contribute to economic growth in the long run. They also observed that when Start-ups launch, they go through innovations and strategies the same way large and medium-sized organizations do to secure brighter futures. Hence, there is a need for proper networking for them to build growth after surviving.

Much work has been done on the importance of networking towards the growth of Start-ups and much more is still being done daily. In the works of Bruderl and Preisendorfer (1998), they observed that networking can lead to the emotional support needed in handling business risk. Networking can also lead to persistence in remaining in business (Gimeno et al, 1997). Other researchers observed that networking can lead to

- Accessing and providing information and advice (Freeman, 1999)
- Generating ideas and gathering information to recognize start-up opportunities (Birley 1985, Smeltzer et al, 1991, Singh et al, 1999, Hoang and Young 2000)
- Providing advice for problem-solving as well as basic information (Johannisson et al, 1994)
- Enhancement of ties to distributors, suppliers, competitors, or customer organizations (Brown and Butler 1995)
- Business exchange and friendship information (Human and Provan 1996)
- Risk reduction by associating with or by gaining explicit certification from well-regarded individuals and organizations
- Faster link to public and higher market valuation resulting from networking (Staunt et al, 1999)
- Other potential start-ups thereby spurring up startup activities (Calabrese et al, 2000).

Simon et al (2007) observed that well-established firms (large or medium firms) usually operate special departments that look after innovations and related markets and training needs, which startups cannot do due to a lack of resources, and these constitute a barrier to their growth. However, by developing their leadership and management skills to maximise internal capacities and also through networking with other startups on certain business functions or by sharing non-confidential knowledge through the network, start-ups can overcome such barriers in a relatively costless manner (Almeida and Kogut 1997; Narula 2004).

Storey (1994) identified three groups of variables that influence start-up growth: management characteristics, business strategies and firm characteristics, with Foreman-Peck et al (2006) adding a fourth as capturing the general business environment, which may include legislation such as that relating to tax, subsidies and competition. Another factor that can lead to the growth of start-ups is education and skills of start-up management (Cooper et al, 1994). Other factors are observation and the accumulation of knowledge relevant to the growth of start-ups in the future (Thorpe et al., 2005).

It could be noted that in the dynamic landscape of startup development, networking transcends mere social interactions. It represents a vital catalyst for team growth and innovation. The power of a network lies in its ability to foster connections, facilitate knowledge, exchange and unlock opportunities that might otherwise remain inaccessible. According to Orpen (1996), networking is a functional matter, with its sphere being mainly confined to connections outside of the individual's organization. Employees could be helped in their job performance by widening their network of contacts beyond their own managers and subordinates, gaining informal cooperation from those contacts because of strategic networking, particularly within the startup ecosystem, which can be likened to the intricate working of a well-designed circuit board, where each connection is purposeful and contributes to the overall functionality of the system. Martinez and Aldrich (2011) discussed the importance of networking strategies for entrepreneurs by balancing cohesion and diversity, while Albourini (2019) wrote about the impact of networking behaviours on the success of entrepreneurial startups in Jordan, where cultivating internal contacts, cultivating external contacts, and engaging in professional activities are the key factors in startups' success. Networking now does not only involve physical contacts, but the internet has made it quite easy through social media platforms. Muathe and Otieno (2023), in their article, discussed and identified six networking strategies for the growth of business. Rauch et al. (2016) discussed the effectiveness of cohesive and diversified networks in business startups.

Networking fosters collaboration. Startups can find partners, collaborators, and even co-founders through networking events, conferences and professional gatherings Spurk et al., 2015). Networking can also be viewed as a process of interacting, exchanging ideas and communicating with people with similar interests in business or any social context. Networking provides leverage to start-ups, giving them insight into the pros and cons of the industry. Networking acts as a guide to a start-up; it bridges the gap of uncertainty, and it helps the new entrepreneur understand the market better. It gives them foresight into the needs of the market, and networking not only bridges the lack of awareness, but it also helps provide the entrepreneur with investment opportunities. Forret and Dougherty (2004) discussed the networking behaviour and career outcomes and their difference for men and women. Networking, as one of the necessities of startups, allows them to tap into a wealth of resources. Startups gain access to knowledge, expertise and practical advice that can help them navigate their challenges. Networking strategies, on the other hand, are a planned act that professionals use to build and maintain their business. Before the startup begins networking, they should understand the goals and objectives of networking (Gibson, Hardy III and Buckley, 2014; Wolff and Moser, 2009). A study conducted by Zhou, Wu, and Luo (2007) shows that networking has a positive effect on profitability growth but not on the performance of sales. Most importantly, generating and maintaining networks as well as the ability to manage them, is important to the growth of startups Adomako et al., 2018). The optimal networking strategy was seen to be the best fit for ICT startups, while the interfirm networking is not necessarily needed for the growth of ICT startups Park et al., 2022).

One of the networking strategies that startups need is building real relationships. Engage genuinely with others, provide value without immediate expectations, and effectively communicate your startup's value propositions. Also, be prepared to explain your mission, products, and unique selling points. You should be able to leave a good and lasting impression on your audience. Moreso, networking doesn't end after initial interactions; startups should be able to follow up with their audience, send a gratitude text. Rahman and Rahman (2021) explained how Norwegian technology startups use open innovation to enhance their businesses. Networking is more than just relationships that create strong connections between firms and stakeholders. That's why the twenty-first century is known as the era of globalization, where firms are open to each other Huggins and Thompson, 2015). Another networking strategy is mentorship, where the mentor guides the mentee in the business world. He gives them advice and acts as a guidance counsellor in the business world. Also, conferencing can be a networking strategy when the entrepreneur discusses their products and services with a group of people.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the literature, it is necessary to find out the major factors influencing the network strategies on the growth trajectory of startups. Can startups leverage the advanced nature and spectrum of networking to advance their growth? Can there be empirical evidence to support the influence of networking on the growth trajectory of startups?

Significance of the Study

The research will be of great importance to startup management as it will equip them with the factors that will help drive the necessary growth in their startups. It will also expose them to new ideas, as well as possible collaborations and connections that are necessary for the growth trajectory of startups. It will also help entrepreneurs to understand how to effectively utilize all available networking strategies in order to enhance their business growth. It will assist the government and policymakers to promote and enact policies that will promote collaboration among startups so as to enhance startup growth, which will further translate into economic growth of the system.

2. Literature Review

Conceptual review

Networking strategies refer to deliberate actions entrepreneurs take to build and sustain relationships that provide access to resources, information, and opportunities necessary for business success. According to Muathe and Otieno (2023), networking provides start-ups with access to external knowledge, mentorship, and collaborative opportunities that strengthen their market positioning. Rauch et al. (2016) further noted that cohesive and diversified networks improve innovation and organizational growth. Similarly, Albourini (2019)

emphasized that networking behaviours, including external contacts and professional activities, enhance entrepreneurial performance in developing economies. Networking also supports the acquisition of market intelligence and promotes resilience among start-ups. As Adomako et al. (2018) observed, firms with strong networking capabilities are more alert to emerging opportunities and can navigate uncertainties effectively. Therefore, networking serves not only as a communication tool but also as a growth mechanism enabling start-ups to overcome structural and resource limitations.

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on two complementary theories:

a. Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990) – This theory explains how entrepreneurs derive value from their social networks. Social capital refers to the resources embedded in social relationships—trust, norms, and shared values—that facilitate cooperation and access to information. Start-ups that cultivate social capital through networking gain competitive advantages such as funding, mentorship, and market access (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

b. Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) – The RBV posits that a firm's sustainable competitive advantage is derived from unique resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Networking creates intangible assets like knowledge, reputation, and collaboration that enhance start-ups' internal capacities and innovation. Through strong external relationships, start-ups can acquire complementary resources that support long-term growth.

Integrating both theories, this study proposes that networking strategies provide both social capital and strategic resources necessary for start-up survival and growth.

Empirical Review

Prior studies have established a positive link between networking and business performance. For example, Martinez and Aldrich (2011) found that balanced network structures foster innovation and adaptability among entrepreneurs. In a study of Jordanian start-ups, Albourini (2019) revealed that networking behaviours significantly predict venture success. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2007) discovered that social networks mediate the relationship between internationalization and firm performance among SMEs. In Africa, Muathe and Otieno (2023) demonstrated that networking services and incubation programs accelerate the growth of new ventures. However, few studies have explored this relationship in Nigeria, particularly in the South East, creating a contextual gap that this study addresses.

Summary of the Literature Review

From the reviewed literature, networking strategies emerge as a critical factor influencing start-up growth. However, there remains a gap in understanding how specific networking practices impact business expansion and sustainability within Nigeria's entrepreneurial ecosystem. This study fills that gap by empirically analyzing the influence of networking strategies on the growth trajectory of start-ups in Anambra State.

3. Methodology

This research work made use of descriptive statistics. Percentages, mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the responses. A question item is accepted if it has an average of 2.5 or above.

Study Area

This study focuses on start-ups originating from Anambra State, Nigeria, which was established on August 27, 1991, and is home to an estimated population of around 5,084,195 residents, making it one of Nigeria's most populous states. The economic activities within Anambra State are primarily centered around agriculture and commerce, with the region being rich in minerals such as gypsum, kaolin, bauxite, iron ore, lead, natural gas, and crude oil. The state boasts a variety of industries, including breweries, textiles, tourism, and soft drink bottling, along with a thriving market for locally crafted wood and metal sculptures.

Anambra State benefits from a favourable economic environment marked by ample skilled labour, strong entrepreneurial spirit, easy access to capital, and abundant natural resources. The state's capital territory, Awka, known for its historical blacksmithing tradition, spans across six Local Government Areas and covers a land area of 400 square kilometres. Notable cities like Onitsha and Nnewi play crucial roles in trade and industry within the state. Onitsha is renowned for having the largest market in West Africa, fostering robust trade relationships locally and internationally, while Nnewi has emerged as a key hub for automobile spare parts and industrial growth.

The dominant language in Anambra State is Igbo, with English being widely spoken owing to the early influence of Missionary Schools and traders from the Royal Niger Company. Additionally, a significant portion of the population communicates in pidgin, a blend of the native Igbo dialect and English, likely originating from the need for effective trade communication with European visitors.

Data Collection

The data for this research work were collected from three locations in Anambra State (Nnewi, Onitsha and Awka), Nigeria. A questionnaire was used for the research work. A total of four hundred and forty (440) questionnaires were shared, but only three hundred and seventy-four (374) were successfully returned. This shows a response rate of 85.00% which was considered high enough for the research work. The distribution of the returned questionnaires as shown in Table 1, shows that of the eighty (80) shared in Awka, one hundred and thirty-five (135) shared in Nnewi, and Two hundred and twenty-five shared in Onitsha, only Seventy-three (73) were returned from Awka, one hundred and fifteen (115) from Nnewi and One hundred and eighty-six (186) from Onitsha. Only the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or Directors were chosen per start-up. The start-ups considered are in the areas of Cosmetics, Information Technology (IT), Marketing, Agriculture, and General Services. The CEO/Directors are between the ages of 20 and 70.

A well-structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used in the collection of data. The questionnaire was validated by experts in measurement and Evaluation. A pilot survey was conducted to further validate the instrument. A Cronbach's Alpha of 0.764 was obtained for the entire instrument.

Table 1: The number of distributed and returned questionnaires by location

Location	Administered Questionnaires	Returned Questionnaires	Response rate (%)
Awka	80	73	91.25
Nnewi	135	115	85.19
Onitsha	225	186	82.67
	440	374	85

Source: Field work (2024)

The data in Table 1 shows that the response rate was 85.00% which was considered high enough for the research.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2. The analysis was done using SPSS version 25. The items were ranked in order of descending means.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Question Items

S/N	Item Description	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remarks
1	Facilitating Access to Resources	4.13	0.902	Accepted
2	Facilitating Access to Knowledge	4.11	0.957	Accepted
3	Facilitating Access to Opportunities	4.09	0.957	Accepted
4	Enhancing Startups Visibility	4.06	0.945	Accepted
5	Enhancing startups' Credibility/trust	4.05	0.939	Accepted
6	Enhancing startups reputations	4.02	0.966	Accepted

7	Enhancing startups' collaborations/partnerships	3.98	0.950	Accepted
8	Increase market recognition	3.95	0.926	Accepted
9	Enhancing startups growth	3.90	0.962	Accepted
10	Lead to Greater insight into the business	3.88	0.959	Accepted
11	Facilitating Access to valuable advice for start-up growth	3.85	0.955	Accepted
12	Help in getting updates and feedback on Start-up operations	3.82	0.949	Accepted
13	Help the startup navigate through challenges	3,82	0.942	Accepted
14	Help the startup in identifying new markets	3.81	0.948	Accepted
15	Help the startup in identifying new pathways	3.79	0.962	Accepted
16	Help the startup in identifying new technologies	3.47	0.960	Accepted
17	Help the startup identify new businesses	3.37	0.935	Accepted
18	Help the startup in identifying new industrial trends	3.34	0.950	Accepted
19	Help the startup in identifying new market demands	3.31	0.957	Accepted
20	Help the startup in identifying new competitive landscapes	3.29	0.963	Accepted
21	Help the startup identify greater opportunities for funding	3.23	0.973	Accepted
22	Enhancing startups' chances of success	3.15	0.953	Accepted
23	Enhancing relationships that create new connections	3.12	0.990	Accepted
24	Enhances start-ups' exchange of ideas	3.08	0.940	Accepted

Source: Field work (2024)

Descriptive Results

The responses to the questionnaire results presented in Table 2, showed that the first three networking effects on startup which influences the trajectory of their growth (mean ± Standard deviation in parenthesis) are "Facilitating Access to Resources" (4.13 ± 0.902), "Facilitating Access to Knowledge" (4.11 ± 0.957), which is in line with the submissions of Almeida and Kogut (1997), Narula (2004) and Thorpe et al (2005) and "Facilitating Access to Opportunities" (4.09 ± 0.957). The findings also revealed that "Enhancing startups' Visibility" (4.06 ± 0.945), "Enhancing startups' Credibility/trust" (4.05 ± 0.939) and "Enhancing startups' reputations" (4.02 ± 0.966) are other factors that influence the growth of startups.

The results also showed that "Enhancing startups collaborations/partnership" (3.98 ± 0.950) is an influencing factor, as supported by the view of Spurk et al. (2015) and Kogut (2000). Market recognition was also accepted as a factor that greatly influences the growth trajectory of startups in the study area, with "Increase market recognition" having a mean ± standard deviation of (3.95 ± 0.926). Thorpe et al (2005), Minhazur et al (2021) and Muathe and Otieno (2023) observed that networking can enhance the growth of startups; these views were also supported by the findings of this research work, "Enhancing startups' growth" (3.90 ± 0.962). The item "Lead to Greater insight into the business" (3.88 ± 0.959) was also accepted as an influencing factor, which was supported by the views of Vidhya et al. (2023), Rane (2023), Kibria et al. (2018), and Puntoni et al. (2021).

"Facilitating Access to valuable advice for start-up growth" (3.85 ± 0.955) was considered an influencing factor of networking. This is in agreement with the views of Johannisson et al (1994) and Huggins and Thompson (2015), who observed that the Networks provide advice to problem-solving as well as basic information on startups. Also collaborating on this point is Freeman (1999), who observed that through networking, startups gain access to and obtain information and advice that are necessary for their growth. Another factor is "Help in getting updates and feedback on Start-up operations" with a mean of 3.82 ± standard deviation of 0.949.

Olorunyomi et al. (2024), Salmela, et al. (2022), and Azra, (2023) supported the finding that network "Help startup in navigating through challenges" (3,82 ± 0.942) while Simon et al (2007), and Staunt et al (1999) supported the findings that network "Help startup in identifying new markets" (3.81 + 0.948). This research work also identifies the following as influencing factors of networking on startup growth. They are (i) "Help startup in identifying new pathways" (3.79 ± 0.962), (ii) "Help startup in identifying new technologies" (3.47 ± 0.960), which was the views of Vidhya, et al. (2023), Rane, (2023), Kibria et al. (2018), and Puntoni, et al. (2021) (iii) "Help startup in identifying new market demands" (3.31 ± 0.957), (iv) "Help startup in identifying new competitive landscapes" (3.29 ± 0.963), (v) "Help startup in identifying greater opportunity for funding" (3.23 ± 0.973), (vi) "Enhancing startups chances of success" (3.15 ±0.953), (vii) "Enhancing relationships that create new connections" (3.12 ± 0.990),

Other factors are "Help startup in identifying new businesses" (3.37 ± 0.935), which was supported by the views of Minhazur et al (2021) and Zhou, Wu, and Luo (2007) and "Help startup in identifying new industrial trends" (3.34 ± 0.950) which had the support of the views of Minhazur et al (2021). The works of Kogut (2000) emphasized that through networking, startups generate ideas that guide them in handling their problem. This is in line with the findings of this research work, "Enhances start-ups exchange of ideas" (3.08 ± 0.940), Minhazur et al (2021), Kogut (2000), Zhou, Wu, and Luo (2007).

Inferential Statistical Analysis

Table 3: Correlation Analysis between Networking Strategies and Start-up Growth

Variables	Mean	SD	r	p-value
Networking Strategies Vs Start-up Growth	3.89	0.94	0.684	0.000

Table 4: Regression Analysis Summary

Model	R	R^2	F-Statistic	Sig.
1	0.684	0.468	324.18	0.000

To further validate the descriptive findings, Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses were conducted to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between networking strategies and start-up growth. The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.01$) shows a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between networking strategies and start-up growth. Regression results indicate that networking strategies explain approximately 46.8% of the variation in start-up growth ($R^2 = 0.468$). The coefficient for networking ($\beta = 0.652$, $p < 0.01$) shows a significant positive effect, implying that effective networking strategies substantially enhance growth.

Discussion of Findings

The inferential results provide empirical evidence supporting the theoretical assumptions of Social Capital Theory and the Resource-Based View. The findings suggest that start-ups that invest in networking activities through mentorship, professional associations, and strategic partnerships achieve greater visibility, collaboration, and market penetration. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that networking is a strategic instrument that influences both the short-term and long-term growth of start-ups.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Conclusion

This study concludes that networking strategies have a significant and positive influence on the growth trajectory of start-ups in Anambra State, Nigeria. By facilitating access to resources, knowledge, and market opportunities, networking enhances visibility, innovation, and competitiveness. Start-ups that deliberately engage in structured networking activities are more likely to achieve sustainable growth and improved market performance.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to entrepreneurship literature by providing empirical validation of the role of networking as a determinant of start-up growth in an emerging economy. It enriches the theoretical discourse on how social capital and resource-based perspectives explain firm performance within the context of small business ecosystems in developing countries.

Practical and Policy Implications

- Entrepreneurs should invest in both online and offline networking to strengthen access to information and collaboration.
- Incubators and accelerators should integrate mentorship and networking programs into their support frameworks.

- Policymakers should promote public–private partnerships, organize regional networking platforms, and provide incentives for collaborative entrepreneurship.
- Entrepreneurship programs should emphasize the role of strategic networking as a growth mechanism.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may include a longitudinal design to assess how networking strategies influence firm performance over time or extend the model to other regions in Nigeria to enhance generalizability.

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