

Strategic Entrepreneurial Approaches and Their Influence on the Competitive Posture of Small-Scale Enterprises in South-South Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Small-scale businesses are pivotal drivers of economic growth, employment generation, and innovation in developing economies. However, their long-term survival and prosperity are intrinsically linked to their ability to achieve and sustain a competitive advantage in dynamic and often challenging market environments. This article explores the profound influence of strategic entrepreneurship on the competitiveness of small-scale businesses, with a specific focus on the South-South region of Nigeria. Strategic entrepreneurship, a synergistic integration of entrepreneurial (opportunity-seeking) and strategic (advantage-seeking) behaviors, offers a powerful framework for businesses to simultaneously identify novel opportunities and develop sustainable competitive positions. Drawing upon resource-based theory and entrepreneurial orientation concepts, this study synthesizes existing literature to elucidate how strategic entrepreneurial practices – encompassing innovation, proactiveness, risk-taking, strategic renewal, and resource leveraging – can enhance market responsiveness, foster unique capabilities, and ultimately improve the competitive posture of small-scale enterprises. The article highlights the contextual factors prevalent in South-South Nigeria that necessitate such an approach and concludes with recommendations for business owners and policymakers aimed at fostering a more strategically entrepreneurial and competitive SME sector.

KEYWORDS: Strategic Entrepreneurship, Competitiveness, Small-Scale Businesses, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Nigeria, South-South Region, Entrepreneurial Orientation, Resource-Based View.

INTRODUCTION

Small-scale businesses, often referred to as Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), constitute the bedrock of most economies worldwide, particularly in developing nations. In Nigeria, these enterprises are widely acknowledged as critical engines for economic growth, job creation, poverty alleviation, and fostering indigenous technological development [1, 5, 34]. They serve as vital conduits for wealth distribution, provide essential goods and services, and act as incubators for innovation and entrepreneurial talent [28]. Despite their undeniable significance, small-scale businesses in Nigeria, and indeed across many emerging markets, frequently grapple with a myriad of challenges that impede their growth, stability, and long-term viability. These challenges include limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, intense competition, volatile market

conditions, and a lack of managerial and strategic capabilities [12, 18].

In an increasingly dynamic, complex, and competitive global marketplace, the ability of any business, regardless of size, to achieve and sustain a **competitive advantage** is paramount for survival and prosperity [26, 27]. For small-scale businesses, which often operate with limited resources and face formidable competition from larger, more established firms, developing and maintaining this competitive edge becomes an existential imperative. Traditional approaches to business management, which might emphasize either pure entrepreneurial agility or rigid strategic planning, often fall short in addressing the multifaceted demands of contemporary markets. This necessitates a more integrated

and dynamic approach that combines the best of both worlds.

This is where the concept of **strategic entrepreneurship** becomes critically relevant. Strategic entrepreneurship (SE) is an emerging field that bridges the gap between traditional strategic management and entrepreneurship. It is defined as the simultaneous pursuit of opportunity and advantage [16]. This dual focus implies that businesses must not only be adept at identifying and exploiting novel opportunities (entrepreneurial dimension) but also at developing and leveraging unique resources and capabilities to create sustainable competitive advantages (strategic dimension) [7, 13]. For small-scale businesses, adopting a strategic entrepreneurial mindset and implementing its practices can be a powerful differentiator, enabling them to navigate uncertainties, innovate effectively, and carve out defensible market positions.

The South-South region of Nigeria, characterized by its unique economic landscape, including significant oil and gas activities, diverse agricultural potential, and a burgeoning informal sector, presents a compelling context for examining the influence of strategic entrepreneurship. Businesses in this region often operate within a challenging environment marked by infrastructural deficits, security concerns, and intense local competition. Understanding how small-scale businesses in this specific context can leverage strategic entrepreneurial approaches to enhance their competitiveness is crucial for regional economic development and the overall growth trajectory of Nigeria's SME sector.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the influence of strategic entrepreneurship on the competitiveness of small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria. It will meticulously explore the theoretical underpinnings of strategic entrepreneurship and competitiveness, synthesize existing literature on their interrelationship, and discuss the practical implications for small business owners and policymakers within the Nigerian context. The subsequent sections will follow the IMRaD format, beginning with a detailed literature review and theoretical framework, followed by a hypothetical methodology for future empirical research, a discussion of synthesized findings, and concluding with actionable recommendations.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

To comprehensively understand the influence of strategic entrepreneurship on the competitiveness of small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria, it is essential to establish a robust theoretical foundation and review existing literature on the core concepts.

2.1. Defining Strategic Entrepreneurship

Strategic entrepreneurship (SE) is a relatively new but rapidly evolving concept that integrates two distinct but complementary domains: entrepreneurship and strategic management [16]. It represents a holistic approach where firms simultaneously engage in **opportunity-seeking** (the entrepreneurial dimension) and **advantage-seeking** (the strategic management dimension) behaviors [7, 13].

- **Entrepreneurial Dimension (Opportunity-Seeking):** This involves the discovery, evaluation, and exploitation of new opportunities. Key characteristics associated with this dimension include:
 - **Innovation:** The development of new products, services, processes, or business models [3, 30]. This can be radical or incremental, but it is central to creating new value.
 - **Proactiveness:** Acting in anticipation of future market needs or changes, rather than merely reacting to them [29]. This involves foresight and taking the initiative.
 - **Risk-Taking:** A willingness to commit resources to ventures with uncertain outcomes, often involving bold and aggressive actions [6, 11].
 - **Opportunity Recognition:** The ability to identify potential new markets, customer needs, or technological advancements that can be leveraged for growth.
- **Strategic Dimension (Advantage-Seeking):** This focuses on developing and sustaining competitive advantage through the effective management and leveraging of resources and capabilities. Key characteristics include:
 - **Strategic Renewal:** The ongoing process of adapting and reconfiguring a firm's resource base and capabilities to maintain relevance and competitiveness in a changing environment [13].
 - **Resource Leveraging:** Efficiently and effectively utilizing existing and newly acquired resources (tangible and intangible) to create value [4]. This includes financial, human, technological, and organizational resources.
 - **Competitive Positioning:** Deliberately choosing a unique position in the market that allows the firm to differentiate itself or operate at a lower cost than competitors.
 - **Organizational Learning:** The capacity of the firm to acquire, assimilate, transform, and exploit knowledge to improve its strategic decision-making and operational effectiveness [3].

Kuratko and Audretsch (2017) emphasize that SE is about "how firms find new opportunities and exploit them to create wealth" [16]. It is not merely about being

entrepreneurial or strategic in isolation, but about integrating these two perspectives to achieve superior performance. For small-scale businesses, SE is particularly vital as it allows them to be agile and innovative while simultaneously building sustainable foundations.

2.2. Understanding Competitiveness for Small-Scale Businesses

Competitiveness, in a business context, refers to the ability of a firm to effectively compete in its market, achieve its objectives, and sustain its position over time. For small-scale businesses, competitiveness is often manifested through:

- **Market Share:** The proportion of total sales in a market accounted for by a particular firm.
- **Profitability:** The ability to generate profits from operations, indicating financial health and sustainability.
- **Growth:** Expansion in terms of sales, assets, or employee numbers [6, 8].
- **Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty:** The extent to which customers are pleased with the firm's products or services, leading to repeat business and positive word-of-mouth.
- **Innovation and Differentiation:** The ability to offer unique products, services, or processes that stand out from competitors [30].
- **Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness:** Operating in a way that minimizes costs while maximizing output, allowing for competitive pricing.
- **Adaptability and Responsiveness:** The capacity to quickly adjust to changing market conditions, customer demands, and competitive pressures.

The concept of competitive advantage is central to competitiveness. Barney, Ketchen, and Wright (2011) highlight that a firm achieves a sustainable competitive advantage when it implements a value-creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors and when these other firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of this strategy [4]. For small-scale businesses, this often means leveraging their agility, proximity to customers, and niche market focus to create unique value propositions.

2.3. Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical perspectives underpin the relationship between strategic entrepreneurship and competitiveness:

2.3.1. Resource-Based View (RBV):

The RBV posits that a firm's sustainable competitive advantage stems from its unique, valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources and capabilities [4]. In the context of strategic entrepreneurship, the RBV

suggests that entrepreneurial activities (opportunity-seeking) allow firms to acquire or develop new valuable resources (e.g., intellectual property, specialized knowledge, unique networks), while strategic actions (advantage-seeking) focus on leveraging these resources effectively to create and sustain competitive advantage [15]. For small businesses, intangible resources like entrepreneurial knowledge, strong customer relationships, and organizational culture can be particularly difficult for competitors to imitate.

2.3.2. Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO):

EO is a firm-level construct that reflects an organization's strategic posture towards entrepreneurship. It typically comprises three key dimensions:

- **Innovativeness:** A firm's tendency to engage in new ideas, experimentation, and R&D activities leading to new products, services, or processes.
- **Proactiveness:** A firm's initiative in anticipating and acting on future market needs, often by being first movers.
- **Risk-Taking:** A firm's willingness to commit significant resources to projects with uncertain outcomes [6, 11, 29].

While EO focuses on entrepreneurial behaviors, strategic entrepreneurship integrates this orientation with a deliberate strategic management process to ensure that these behaviors translate into sustainable competitive advantage and improved performance [13]. Studies have shown a positive link between EO and firm performance, particularly in SMEs [6, 10, 22, 29, 31].

2.4. Strategic Entrepreneurship and Competitiveness in SMEs: A Review

The interplay between strategic entrepreneurship and competitiveness in SMEs has been a growing area of academic inquiry. Research consistently suggests that firms that effectively integrate entrepreneurial and strategic behaviors tend to outperform those that focus on only one dimension.

- **Innovation as a Competitive Driver:** Strategic entrepreneurship emphasizes continuous innovation. For small businesses, innovation can be a powerful tool to differentiate themselves from larger competitors, create unique value propositions, and respond to evolving customer needs [3, 30, 35]. This includes product innovation, process innovation, and business model innovation. Makinde and Agu (2018) found a significant relationship between strategic entrepreneurship and the performance of SMEs in Aba Metropolis, Nigeria, with innovation being a key component [19].

- **Proactiveness and Market Responsiveness:** Proactive small businesses, guided by a strategic entrepreneurial approach, are better positioned to anticipate market shifts, identify emerging opportunities, and act swiftly. This agility allows them to gain a first-mover advantage or quickly adapt to competitive pressures, enhancing their market responsiveness and overall competitiveness [7, 29].
- **Risk-Taking and Opportunity Exploitation:** While risk-taking is inherent in entrepreneurship, strategic entrepreneurship ensures that risks are calculated and aligned with the firm's long-term strategic goals. This enables small businesses to exploit high-potential opportunities that competitors might shy away from, leading to significant competitive gains [8].
- **Strategic Renewal and Adaptability:** In dynamic environments, small businesses must constantly renew their strategies and resource configurations. Strategic entrepreneurship facilitates this continuous learning and adaptation, ensuring that the firm remains relevant and competitive [13]. This is particularly important in volatile markets like Nigeria.
- **Resource Leveraging and Efficiency:** SMEs often face resource constraints. Strategic entrepreneurship helps them to efficiently leverage their limited resources, including human capital, knowledge, and networks, to create maximum value. This efficiency can translate into cost advantages or superior quality, enhancing competitiveness [4, 15].
- **Human Capital and Entrepreneurial Skills:** The skills and orientation of the entrepreneur and their employees are critical. Entrepreneurial skills development [5, 25] and entrepreneurial training and education [20] play a vital role in fostering a strategic entrepreneurial mindset within small businesses. Leadership also plays a crucial role in SMEs [17].

Several studies from the Nigerian context support the importance of strategic management and entrepreneurial orientation for SME performance and competitiveness. Adeyemi, Isaac, and Olufemi (2017) emphasize strategic management as a policy to enhance sustainable business development in Nigerian SMEs [1]. Adibe, Akam, and Onuorah (2023) found entrepreneurial orientation to influence the performance of selected SMEs in Southeast Nigeria [2]. Okoi et al. (2022) specifically examined strategic entrepreneurship practices and performance of SMEs in Nigeria, finding a positive relationship [23]. Nnabugwu (2021) also linked strategic entrepreneurship to competitive advantage in SMEs in Anambra State [21]. However, the specific nuances of the South-South Nigerian context, with its unique challenges and opportunities, warrant further focused exploration.

2.5. Context of South-South Nigeria

The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria comprises six states: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. This region is economically significant due to its vast oil and gas reserves, which contribute substantially to Nigeria's national revenue. However, reliance on oil has also led to underdevelopment in other sectors, environmental degradation, and socio-economic challenges.

Small-scale businesses in this region operate within a complex environment characterized by:

- **Resource Endowments:** While rich in oil, the region also has significant agricultural, aquatic, and human resources that are often underdeveloped.
- **Infrastructural Deficiencies:** Despite oil wealth, many areas suffer from poor road networks, inconsistent power supply, and limited access to modern infrastructure, increasing operational costs for SMEs.
- **Security Challenges:** Issues such as pipeline vandalism, kidnapping, and civil unrest can create an unstable business environment, deterring investment and hindering growth.
- **High Competition:** The presence of both large multinational corporations (in the oil sector) and a high density of informal sector businesses creates intense competition for small-scale enterprises.
- **Access to Finance:** Similar to other parts of Nigeria, SMEs in the South-South often struggle with limited access to affordable credit, which is crucial for investment in strategic initiatives [12].
- **Entrepreneurial Culture:** The region has a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit, but there is a need to channel this towards more strategically oriented and sustainable ventures.

Given these contextual factors, strategic entrepreneurship becomes not just an advantage but a necessity for small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria to achieve and sustain competitiveness. It enables them to identify niche opportunities, innovate despite constraints, manage risks effectively, and build unique capabilities that are difficult for competitors to replicate.

METHODOLOGY (Hypothetical Empirical Research Design)

This section outlines a comprehensive hypothetical empirical research design that *could* be employed in future studies to rigorously test the propositions and explore the influence of strategic entrepreneurship on the competitiveness of small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria. This detailed methodology is presented to illustrate the practical application of research principles and contribute to the overall depth of this article.

3.1. Research Philosophy and Approach

- **Research Philosophy:** A **positivist philosophy** would underpin this study, emphasizing objective inquiry and the testing of hypotheses derived from existing theories (e.g., Resource-Based View, Entrepreneurial Orientation). This approach assumes that social reality can be studied objectively and that relationships between variables can be identified and measured.
- **Research Approach:** A **deductive approach** would be adopted, moving from general theoretical propositions about strategic entrepreneurship and competitiveness to specific hypotheses that can be empirically tested using quantitative data.
- **Research Design:** A **cross-sectional survey design** would be the primary method for data collection. This design allows for the collection of data on multiple variables from a large sample at a single point in time, enabling the examination of relationships and patterns. While cross-sectional designs cannot establish causality, they are effective for identifying correlations and describing phenomena at a given moment.

3.2. Population and Sampling

- **Target Population:** The study would focus on **owners/managers of registered small-scale businesses** operating within the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The definition of "small-scale business" would align with the official Nigerian SME classification (e.g., based on employee numbers and/or asset base).
- **Sampling Frame:** A comprehensive list of registered small-scale businesses in the South-South states (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Rivers) would serve as the sampling frame. This could be obtained from relevant government agencies (e.g., Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria - SMEDAN, Corporate Affairs Commission - CAC), chambers of commerce, or professional associations.
- **Sampling Technique:** A **stratified random sampling** technique would be ideal to ensure representation across different states within the South-South region and potentially across different business sectors (e.g., manufacturing, services, trade, agriculture) to capture the diversity of small businesses. Within each stratum, simple random sampling could be used to select individual businesses.
- **Sample Size:** To ensure sufficient statistical power for multivariate analyses (e.g., regression, Structural Equation Modeling), a minimum sample size of **300-500 small-scale business owners/managers** would be targeted. This range is consistent with recommendations for robust statistical tests in similar studies [10]. A response rate of 60-70% would be aimed for, similar to successful survey studies.

3.3. Instrumentation and Measurement

A **self-administered questionnaire** would be the primary data collection instrument, designed to measure strategic entrepreneurship practices and various dimensions of business competitiveness. The questionnaire would primarily utilize a **five-point Likert rating scale** (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) for most attitudinal and perceptual constructs.

3.3.1. Questionnaire Sections:

- **Demographic and Business Information:** Age, gender, education level of the owner/manager, years in business, business sector, number of employees, legal structure of the business.
- **Strategic Entrepreneurship (Independent Variable):** This would be a multi-item construct measuring the firm's engagement in both entrepreneurial and strategic behaviors. Items would be adapted from established scales in the literature (e.g., [13, 16, 23]). Dimensions would include:
 - **Innovativeness:** Questions on introducing new products/services, processes, or business models; R&D investment.
 - **Proactiveness:** Questions on anticipating market changes, being first movers, taking initiative.
 - **Risk-Taking:** Questions on willingness to invest in uncertain ventures, bold competitive actions.
 - **Strategic Renewal:** Questions on adapting business models, reconfiguring resources, continuous learning.
 - **Resource Leveraging:** Questions on efficient utilization of financial, human, technological, and intangible resources.
- **Business Competitiveness (Dependent Variable):** This would also be a multi-item construct, capturing various aspects of competitive posture. Items would be adapted from relevant literature (e.g., [26, 27]). Dimensions could include:
 - **Market Performance:** Questions on market share growth, sales growth, customer acquisition.
 - **Financial Performance:** Questions on profitability, revenue growth, return on investment (perceived by owner/manager).
 - **Operational Efficiency:** Questions on cost reduction, productivity improvements.
 - **Product/Service Differentiation:** Questions on uniqueness of offerings, quality, brand reputation.
 - **Customer Loyalty:** Questions on repeat business, customer retention.

3.3.2. Pre-testing and Pilot Study:

Before full-scale data collection, the questionnaire would undergo rigorous pre-testing with a small group of target respondents (e.g., 10-15 business owners) to identify any ambiguities, confusing language, or irrelevant items. A pilot study (e.g., with 30-50 respondents) would then be conducted to further refine the instrument, assess initial reliability, and estimate response rates. This step is crucial for ensuring the clarity and cultural appropriateness of the questions within the South-South Nigerian context.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

Rigorous measures would be implemented to ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument:

- **Content Validity:** Ensured through expert review. A panel of academics (professors in entrepreneurship, strategic management, and business administration) and industry practitioners (experienced SME consultants, representatives from chambers of commerce) familiar with the Nigerian business context would review the questionnaire items to ensure they comprehensively cover the constructs and are relevant to small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria.
- **Construct Validity (Confirmatory Factor Analysis - CFA):** CFA would be performed using statistical software to confirm the underlying factor structure of the multi-item constructs.
 - **Convergent Validity:** Assessed by examining factor loadings (ideally > 0.7), Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.5), and Composite Reliability (CR > 0.7). High values would indicate that items truly measure their intended constructs.
 - **Discriminant Validity:** Assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (square root of AVE for each construct should be greater than its correlations with other constructs) and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (ideally < 0.9). This ensures that constructs are distinct from each other.
- **Reliability (Internal Consistency):** Assessed using Cronbach's Alpha for each multi-item scale. Values above 0.7 would indicate acceptable internal consistency, meaning the items within a scale are consistently measuring the same underlying construct.
- **Common Method Bias (CMB):** Since self-administered questionnaires are susceptible to CMB, several procedural and statistical remedies would be employed:
 - **Procedural:** Ensuring anonymity, separating measurement of predictor and criterion variables, varying question order, and using different scale formats for different constructs.

- **Statistical:** Performing Harman's one-factor test (if a single factor accounts for less than 50% of the variance, CMB is not a major concern) [32]. More advanced techniques like marker variable analysis or common latent factor (CLF) could also be considered.

- **Multicollinearity:** The extent of multicollinearity among independent variables would be assessed by computing Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. VIF values below 3.3 (or 5, depending on strictness) would indicate the absence of problematic multicollinearity.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data collected from the surveys would be analyzed using appropriate statistical software (e.g., SPSS, SmartPLS, R, AMOS).

- **Descriptive Statistics:** To summarize the characteristics of the respondents and their businesses, and to provide an overview of the levels of strategic entrepreneurship practices and business competitiveness. This would include frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and ranges.
- **Inferential Statistics:** To test hypotheses and examine relationships between variables.
 - **Correlation Analysis:** To identify the strength and direction of linear relationships between the dimensions of strategic entrepreneurship and various aspects of business competitiveness.
 - **Regression Analysis:** To determine the predictive power of strategic entrepreneurship (and its dimensions) on overall business competitiveness and its individual components. Multiple regression would be used to assess the unique contribution of each strategic entrepreneurship dimension while controlling for others.
 - **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM):** This would be the most suitable analytical technique for testing complex theoretical models with multiple hypothesized relationships and latent variables. **Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM)** is often preferred for prediction and theory development, especially with complex models and non-normal data, and would be appropriate here [17]. SEM would allow for simultaneous testing of direct and indirect effects, and for assessing the overall fit of the model to the data.
 - **Hypothesis Testing:** Each hypothesis derived from the theoretical framework (e.g., "Strategic entrepreneurship positively influences the competitiveness of small-scale businesses")

would be statistically tested using the appropriate inferential techniques.

This robust hypothetical methodology provides a clear roadmap for future empirical research, ensuring that any subsequent studies are conducted with scientific rigor to generate reliable and valid insights into the complex dynamics of strategic entrepreneurship and competitiveness in small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (Theoretical Synthesis of Expected Findings)

As this article is a theoretical synthesis, it does not present new empirical results from primary data collection. Instead, this section will articulate the **synthesized findings and theoretical implications** derived from the comprehensive literature review, particularly in light of the conceptual framework and the specific context of small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria. The "Discussion" will then delve deeper into the nuances and broader implications of these theoretical findings.

4.1. Synthesized Findings on the Influence of Strategic Entrepreneurship

Based on the theoretical frameworks and existing literature, it is expected that strategic entrepreneurship will exert a significant and positive influence on the competitiveness of small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria across multiple dimensions. The synthesis points to the following key expected findings:

4.1.1. Strategic Entrepreneurship and Enhanced Market Performance:

The integration of entrepreneurial opportunity-seeking with strategic advantage-seeking is anticipated to directly translate into improved market performance for small-scale businesses.

- **Increased Market Share and Sales Growth:** Firms exhibiting high innovativeness and proactiveness, core components of strategic entrepreneurship, are more likely to introduce novel products or services, or enter new market segments ahead of competitors [7, 29]. This first-mover advantage, coupled with a strategic focus on competitive positioning, is expected to lead to higher sales volumes and an expansion of market share. This aligns with findings that entrepreneurial orientation positively impacts firm growth [6, 8].
- **Improved Customer Acquisition and Loyalty:** Strategic entrepreneurial firms are adept at identifying unmet customer needs and developing differentiated offerings. This customer-centric innovation, combined with a proactive approach to service delivery, is expected to enhance customer satisfaction and foster

greater loyalty, which are crucial for sustained market performance.

4.1.2. Strategic Entrepreneurship and Superior Financial Performance:

While small businesses in Nigeria often face financial constraints [12], strategic entrepreneurship is expected to contribute positively to their financial health.

- **Enhanced Profitability:** By focusing on both innovation and efficient resource leveraging, strategic entrepreneurial firms can create higher value for customers, command better pricing, or achieve cost efficiencies. This dual approach is expected to lead to improved profit margins and overall profitability [13, 29].
- **Optimized Resource Utilization:** The strategic dimension of SE emphasizes the efficient and effective deployment of existing and newly acquired resources [4, 15]. For resource-constrained small businesses, this means maximizing the return on limited capital, human talent, and technological investments, thereby improving financial outcomes.

4.1.3. Strategic Entrepreneurship and Operational Efficiency/Innovation:

Strategic entrepreneurship fosters a culture of continuous improvement and adaptation, which directly impacts operational aspects.

- **Process Innovation and Cost Reduction:** An innovative mindset, coupled with strategic analysis, encourages small businesses to seek out more efficient operational processes, reduce waste, and optimize supply chains. This can lead to significant cost reductions, enhancing their competitive pricing ability.
- **Improved Productivity:** By strategically investing in technology and human capital (e.g., through entrepreneurial skills development [5, 25]), firms can boost productivity, allowing them to do more with less, which is critical for smaller enterprises.

4.1.4. Strategic Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Differentiation:

The core of competitive advantage lies in differentiation, and strategic entrepreneurship is uniquely positioned to foster this.

- **Unique Value Propositions:** The opportunity-seeking aspect drives the creation of novel products, services, or customer experiences that stand out from competitors. The advantage-seeking aspect ensures that these differentiators are difficult for rivals to imitate, leading to a sustainable competitive edge [21, 26].

- **Adaptability and Resilience:** In the volatile business environment of South-South Nigeria, firms that can strategically renew themselves and adapt proactively to changing market conditions, regulatory shifts, or security challenges are more likely to survive and thrive. This adaptability, a hallmark of strategic entrepreneurship, contributes directly to long-term competitiveness.

4.1.5. Strategic Entrepreneurship and Human Capital Development:

The emphasis on entrepreneurial skills and knowledge management within strategic entrepreneurship indirectly contributes to competitiveness.

- **Skilled Workforce:** Firms that embrace strategic entrepreneurship are likely to invest in training and developing the entrepreneurial skills of their employees [5, 20]. A more skilled and entrepreneurial workforce can drive internal innovation and improve overall organizational performance.
- **Knowledge Leveraging:** Strategic entrepreneurship encourages firms to effectively acquire, assimilate, and exploit knowledge, leading to better decision-making and the development of unique capabilities [3].

4.2. Discussion of Findings and Implications

The synthesized findings underscore that strategic entrepreneurship is not merely a theoretical construct but a practical imperative for small-scale businesses seeking to thrive in the competitive landscape of South-South Nigeria. The implications of these expected findings are multi-faceted, affecting business owners, policymakers, and the broader economic ecosystem.

4.2.1. Beyond Mere Survival: The Shift to Proactive Growth:

For many small businesses in Nigeria, the primary focus is often on day-to-day survival due to challenging operating conditions. However, the theoretical synthesis suggests that adopting a strategic entrepreneurial approach can shift this mindset from reactive survival to proactive growth and competitive positioning. By consciously pursuing both new opportunities and sustainable advantages, small businesses can move beyond simply reacting to market forces and instead shape their own destinies. This aligns with the idea that strategic management is a policy to enhance sustainable business development [1].

4.2.2. Innovation as a Non-Negotiable Imperative:

The literature consistently highlights innovation as a core component of strategic entrepreneurship and a key driver of competitiveness [3, 30, 35]. For small-scale businesses in

South-South Nigeria, this means that simply offering generic products or services is no longer sufficient. They must actively seek ways to innovate – whether in product design, service delivery, operational processes, or business models – to differentiate themselves. This is particularly relevant in a region with diverse local needs and untapped market niches. The findings by Makinde and Agu (2018) on SMEs in Aba Metropolis, a city in the South-South region, further support this [19].

4.2.3. The Strategic Management of Scarcity:

Small businesses are inherently resource-constrained. Strategic entrepreneurship provides a framework for managing this scarcity effectively. By focusing on resource leveraging, these firms can maximize the value derived from their limited financial, human, and technological assets. This involves not just acquiring resources but also efficiently deploying and reconfiguring them to meet strategic objectives [4, 15]. This is crucial in an environment where access to finance is a significant barrier [12].

4.2.4. Adapting to Volatility and Uncertainty:

The South-South Nigerian context is marked by various forms of volatility, including economic fluctuations, security concerns, and infrastructural challenges. Strategic entrepreneurship, with its emphasis on strategic renewal and adaptability, equips small businesses to navigate such uncertainties. Firms that can quickly sense changes, make strategic adjustments, and reallocate resources are more likely to build resilience and maintain their competitive edge [13].

4.2.5. The Role of the Entrepreneur and Human Capital:

The success of strategic entrepreneurship heavily relies on the capabilities and mindset of the entrepreneur and their team. The ability to identify opportunities, take calculated risks, and implement strategic decisions rests on strong entrepreneurial skills and leadership [5, 17, 25]. This underscores the importance of entrepreneurship training and education programs [20] that go beyond basic business skills to include strategic thinking and innovation management.

4.2.6. Implications for Policymakers and Support Organizations:

The findings suggest that policymakers and support organizations (like SMEDAN) in Nigeria, particularly in the South-South region, have a critical role to play in fostering strategic entrepreneurship among small-scale businesses.

- **Access to Finance:** Initiatives aimed at improving access to affordable credit for SMEs must specifically

consider funding for innovation and strategic investments, not just working capital.

- **Infrastructure Development:** Addressing infrastructural deficits (power, roads, internet connectivity) will lower operational costs and enable SMEs to fully leverage digital tools for strategic entrepreneurship.
- **Capacity Building:** Training programs should be designed to cultivate strategic thinking, innovation management, and risk assessment skills among small business owners, moving beyond generic entrepreneurial training.
- **Policy Support for Innovation:** Policies that incentivize R&D, intellectual property protection, and collaboration among SMEs can foster a more innovative ecosystem.
- **Security and Stability:** Efforts to improve security and create a stable business environment are foundational for any long-term strategic planning by small businesses.

In conclusion, the theoretical synthesis strongly supports the notion that strategic entrepreneurship is a vital pathway for small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria to achieve and sustain competitiveness. By consciously integrating entrepreneurial agility with strategic foresight, these firms can navigate challenges, exploit opportunities, and build unique capabilities that ensure their long-term success in a dynamic market.

CONCLUSION and Recommendations

Small-scale businesses are indispensable pillars of the Nigerian economy, particularly in the South-South region, contributing significantly to employment, innovation, and local economic development. However, their ability to thrive amidst intense competition and a challenging operational environment hinges critically on their capacity to achieve and sustain a competitive advantage. This article has thoroughly explored the profound influence of strategic entrepreneurship on the competitiveness of these vital enterprises. By synthesizing established theoretical frameworks, particularly the Resource-Based View and Entrepreneurial Orientation, and reviewing relevant literature, it has been established that strategic entrepreneurship, defined as the simultaneous pursuit of opportunity and advantage, offers a powerful and necessary framework for small-scale businesses to navigate market dynamics and secure their long-term viability.

The theoretical synthesis indicates that engaging in strategic entrepreneurial practices – encompassing innovativeness, proactiveness, calculated risk-taking, strategic renewal, and efficient resource leveraging – is expected to directly enhance the market performance, financial health, operational efficiency, and overall differentiation of small-

scale businesses. In the unique context of South-South Nigeria, marked by both resource endowments and significant infrastructural and security challenges, adopting such an integrated approach becomes not just a strategic option but a critical imperative for survival and growth. The ability to innovate and adapt proactively, while strategically managing limited resources, will be the hallmark of competitive small-scale enterprises in this region.

5.1. Recommendations for Small-Scale Business Owners/Managers

1. Embrace a Strategic Entrepreneurial Mindset:

- **Cultivate Dual Focus:** Actively seek new opportunities (e.g., emerging market niches, new technologies) while simultaneously developing and leveraging unique resources and capabilities to create sustainable advantages.
- **Foster Innovation:** Dedicate resources (even if limited) to continuous innovation in products, services, processes, or business models. Encourage experimentation and learning from failures.
- **Be Proactive, Not Reactive:** Anticipate market changes and competitive moves. Invest in market intelligence and foresight to position your business ahead of the curve.
- **Calculate Risks:** While risk-taking is essential, ensure that risks are thoroughly assessed and aligned with the firm's strategic objectives. Avoid impulsive decisions.

2. Invest in Human Capital and Knowledge Management:

- **Develop Entrepreneurial Skills:** Continuously invest in training for yourself and your employees in areas such as strategic thinking, innovation management, market analysis, and risk assessment [5, 20, 25].
- **Foster Organizational Learning:** Create a culture where knowledge is shared, learned from, and applied to improve strategic decision-making and operational efficiency [3].
- **Strong Leadership:** Recognize the critical role of effective leadership in driving strategic entrepreneurial initiatives within the SME [17].

3. Optimize Resource Leveraging:

- **Lean Operations:** Focus on maximizing output from minimal inputs. Identify and eliminate waste in all aspects of operations.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Explore collaborations with other SMEs, larger firms, or research institutions to access complementary resources, knowledge, and markets.

- **Intangible Assets:** Recognize and cultivate intangible resources such as brand reputation, customer relationships, and unique organizational culture, as these are often difficult for competitors to imitate [4].

4. Prioritize Strategic Renewal:

- **Regular Strategic Review:** Periodically review your business model, competitive landscape, and resource base to identify areas for renewal and adaptation.
- **Adaptability:** Develop organizational agility to quickly respond to changes in customer preferences, technology, or the regulatory environment.

5.2. Recommendations for Policymakers and Support Organizations

1. Enhance Access to Strategic Finance:

- **Specialized Funding:** Develop and promote specialized financial products (e.g., innovation grants, venture capital for SMEs, long-term loans with flexible terms) that specifically support strategic investments in R&D, technology adoption, and market expansion by small businesses.
- **Capacity Building for Lenders:** Train financial institutions to better understand and assess the unique financial needs and risk profiles of strategically entrepreneurial SMEs.

2. Improve Infrastructure and Business Environment:

- **Consistent Power Supply:** Prioritize investments in reliable and affordable power supply, as this is a fundamental enabler for operational efficiency and technological adoption for SMEs.
- **Road Networks and Logistics:** Improve transportation infrastructure to reduce logistics costs and facilitate market access for small businesses.
- **Security Measures:** Implement robust security measures to create a stable and predictable operating environment, which is crucial for long-term strategic planning and investment.

3. Strengthen Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Support:

- **Tailored Training Programs:** Design and deliver entrepreneurship training programs that specifically focus on strategic thinking, innovation management, competitive analysis, and resource leveraging, moving beyond basic business management [20].
- **Mentorship and Networking:** Facilitate mentorship programs and networking platforms that connect aspiring and existing

strategic entrepreneurs with experienced mentors and industry experts.

- **Knowledge Transfer:** Promote collaborations between universities, research institutions, and SMEs to facilitate the transfer of relevant knowledge and technology.

4. Foster a Supportive Regulatory Framework:

- **Ease of Doing Business:** Continuously review and streamline regulations to reduce the burden on small businesses, making it easier for them to innovate and operate competitively.
- **Intellectual Property Protection:** Strengthen intellectual property rights enforcement to protect the innovations of small businesses, incentivizing further R&D.
- **Incentives for Collaboration:** Introduce policies that incentivize technological collaboration and partnerships among SMEs [30].

5.3. Avenues for Future Research

1. **Empirical Validation:** Conduct large-scale empirical studies using the hypothetical methodology outlined, collecting primary data from small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria to statistically validate the hypothesized relationships between strategic entrepreneurship and various dimensions of competitiveness.
2. **Qualitative Insights:** Employ qualitative research methods (e.g., in-depth interviews, case studies) to explore the nuances of how strategic entrepreneurship is practiced within different sectors of small-scale businesses in the region, capturing the lived experiences and contextual factors.
3. **Mediating/Moderating Factors:** Investigate the mediating roles of factors like access to finance, technological capability, or entrepreneurial culture, and the moderating roles of industry dynamism or government support, on the strategic entrepreneurship-competitiveness relationship [12, 30, 35].
4. **Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct longitudinal research to track the development of strategic entrepreneurial capabilities and their long-term impact on business competitiveness over time in the South-South Nigerian context.
5. **Comparative Studies:** Compare the strategic entrepreneurial practices and competitiveness levels of small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria with those in other Nigerian regions or other developing economies to identify unique challenges and best practices.

By collectively embracing these recommendations and pursuing further rigorous research, stakeholders can

significantly bolster the strategic entrepreneurial capacity of small-scale businesses in South-South Nigeria, thereby enhancing their competitiveness and contributing substantially to the region's sustainable economic development.

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