

Entrepreneurial Skills and Organizational Competitiveness of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the impact of entrepreneurial skills—specifically innovative thinking and opportunity recognition—on the organizational competitiveness of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Rivers State, Nigeria. Employing a quantitative research design and a cross-sectional survey, data were collected from 380 SME owners and managers using structured questionnaires. Analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS version 4.0. Findings revealed that both innovative thinking and opportunity recognition significantly and positively affect organizational responsiveness and differentiation, highlighting the strategic relevance of entrepreneurial cognition in a dynamic market environment. The study further validates existing theoretical assumptions by linking cognitive competencies to strategic agility and market positioning. Recommendations are provided to SMEs to embrace design thinking and continuous improvement strategies to carve a distinct identity and increase customer loyalty.*

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Skills, Innovative Thinking, Opportunity Recognition, Organizational Competitiveness.

Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are widely recognized as engines of economic growth, innovation, and employment generation, particularly in developing economies like Nigeria. In Rivers State, SMEs play a pivotal role in driving local development, reducing poverty, and fostering entrepreneurial dynamism. However, the increasingly volatile business environment—marked by technological disruption, shifting consumer preferences, and global competition—demands that SMEs develop strategic capabilities to remain competitive (Aigboje, 2020).

Entrepreneurial skills, especially innovative thinking and opportunity recognition, have emerged as critical competencies that enable SMEs to adapt, differentiate, and respond effectively to market changes (Amadi & Weke, 2024). Innovative thinking empowers entrepreneurs to generate novel ideas, reconfigure business models, and introduce unique products or services. Opportunity recognition, on the other hand, allows entrepreneurs to identify and exploit emerging market gaps, customer needs, and technological trends (Ayor & Alikor, 2023).

Organizational competitiveness—defined by a firm's ability to respond swiftly to environmental changes (organizational responsiveness) and distinguish itself from rivals (differentiation)—is increasingly dependent on these entrepreneurial capabilities. Yet, despite the strategic importance of these skills, many SMEs in Rivers State struggle to translate them into sustainable competitive advantage. This study investigates the extent to which entrepreneurial skills influence organizational competitiveness, focusing on the relationships between innovative thinking, opportunity recognition, organizational responsiveness, and differentiation.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the proliferation of SMEs in Rivers State, many remain vulnerable to market turbulence, technological shifts, and competitive pressures. Prior research indicates that entrepreneurial competencies are essential for strategic agility and market positioning (Aigboje, 2018; Osita-Ejikeme & Onuoha, 2021). However, empirical evidence on how specific entrepreneurial skills—such as innovative thinking and opportunity recognition—impact key dimensions of competitiveness remains fragmented and inconclusive.

For instance, while some studies suggest that innovative thinking enhances organizational responsiveness by fostering adaptability and proactive decision-making (Ayor & Alikor, 2023), others argue that without structured mechanisms for implementation, such thinking may not translate into tangible outcomes (Adokiye et al., 2017). Similarly, opportunity recognition is often hailed as a driver of differentiation, yet SMEs frequently lack the strategic orientation to capitalize on identified opportunities (Amadi et al., 2021).

This gap in understanding poses a challenge for SME owners, policymakers, and support institutions seeking to enhance the competitiveness of local enterprises. Without clear insights into how entrepreneurial skills influence responsiveness and differentiation, interventions may be misaligned or ineffective. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by empirically examining the relationships between innovative thinking, opportunity recognition, and organizational competitiveness among SMEs in Rivers State.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine the relationship between innovative thinking and organizational responsiveness of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- ii. Determine the relationship between innovative thinking and differentiation of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- iii. Investigate relationship between opportunity recognition and organizational responsiveness of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- iv. Ascertain the relationship between opportunity recognition and differentiation SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions served as a guild in this study;

- i. What is the nature of the relationship between innovative thinking and organizational responsiveness of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria?
- ii. How does innovative thinking relate to differentiation of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria?
- iii. What is the relationship between opportunity recognition and organizational responsiveness of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria?
- iv. How does opportunity recognition relate to differentiation of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses served as a tentative answer to the research questions.

- H0₁:** There is no significant relationship between innovative thinking and organizational responsiveness of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- H0₂:** There is no significant relationship between innovative thinking and differentiation of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- H0₃:** There is no significant relationship between opportunity recognition and organizational responsiveness of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- H0₄:** There is no significant relationship between opportunity recognition and differentiation of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Review of Literature

This study is anchored on two key theories, Psychological Theory of Entrepreneurial Competency and Entrepreneurial Alertness Theory. Psychological Theory of Entrepreneurial Competency (Boyatzis, 1982) posits that entrepreneurial success is driven by personal traits such as creativity, proactiveness, and openness to experience. These traits influence the entrepreneur's ability to recognize opportunities and respond effectively to environmental challenges (Adokiye et al., 2017).

Entrepreneurial Alertness Theory (Kirzner, 1973) emphasizes the entrepreneur's ability to notice and act upon market disequilibria. Alertness enables SMEs to identify unmet needs and innovate accordingly, thereby enhancing competitiveness (Onuoha, 2022). These theories provide a foundation for understanding how entrepreneurial skills translate into organizational competitiveness in SMEs.

Conceptual Framework

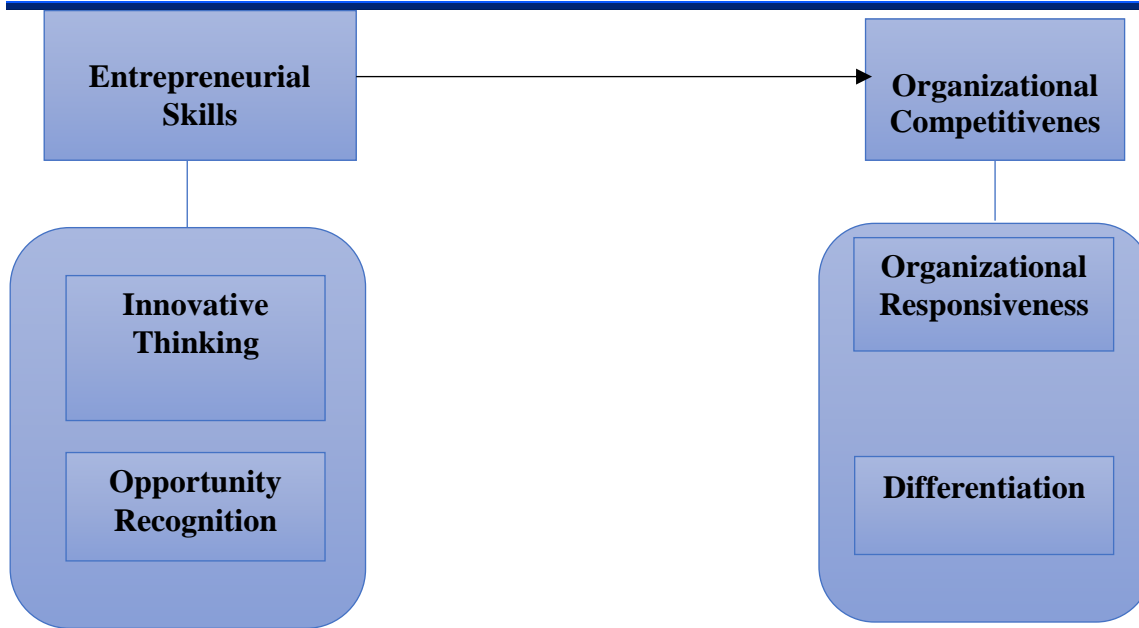


Figure 1: Conceptual Model
(Source: Ardichvili, Cardozo & Ray, 2003; Keller, 1993)

Entrepreneurial Skills

Entrepreneurial skills refer to the cognitive, behavioral, and strategic capabilities that enable individuals to identify opportunities, innovate, and mobilize resources effectively (Man et al., 2002). These skills include innovative thinking, opportunity recognition, risk-taking, strategic competence, and networking ability. Entrepreneurial skills refer to the competencies that enable individuals to identify opportunities, mobilize resources, and manage ventures effectively. These include communication, financial literacy, risk-taking, leadership, and strategic thinking (Emele, 2024). In SMEs, such skills are crucial for navigating uncertainty and driving performance. For instance, Abdul (2018) found that Nigerian entrepreneurs who demonstrated strong problem-solving and creative thinking skills experienced higher growth rates in their businesses. Similarly, Drakaki (2025) emphasized that adaptability and experiential learning are emerging as critical entrepreneurial skills in knowledge-intensive industries. In the context of SMEs, these competencies are essential for navigating dynamic markets and sustaining competitive advantage (Ahmad et al., 2010). Studies in Rivers State have shown that entrepreneurial competence significantly correlates with SME performance, particularly in areas such as responsiveness and differentiation (Akhigbe, 2020). Strategic and opportunity competencies were found to enhance organizational agility, alertness, and responsiveness (Lawrence-Chuku & Onuoha, 2022).

Innovative Thinking

Innovative thinking involves the ability to generate novel ideas and solutions that add value to products, services, or processes. It is a mindset that fosters creativity and experimentation (Adesina & Adeku, 2025). Innovative thinking involves the ability to generate novel ideas and solutions that add value to products, services, or processes. It is a mindset that encourages experimentation and creativity (Gustina et al., 2025). SMEs that cultivate team cohesion and open communication tend to be more innovative, as collaboration enhances idea generation. According to Koporcic et al. (2025), innovative SMEs were more resilient during crises due to their ability to pivot quickly and adapt to changing market conditions. SMEs that foster innovative thinking are more likely to adapt to market changes and maintain competitiveness. Edobor et al. (2023) highlight that innovation in Nigerian SMEs is often driven by necessity, especially in response to economic disruptions like fuel hikes and digital transformation.

Opportunity Recognition

Opportunity recognition is the process of identifying viable business ideas or market gaps that can be exploited for profit or impact. It is considered the first step in the entrepreneurial process (Lip et al., 2025). SMEs that excel in opportunity recognition often leverage environmental scanning, customer feedback, and technological trends. SMEs that actively engage in strategic opportunity

recognition are better positioned to exploit market gaps and sustain performance. Sanhokwe (2022) emphasizes that innovation and risk-taking enhance the ability to recognize and exploit opportunities, especially during crises.

Organizational Competitiveness

Organizational competitiveness refers to a firm's ability to maintain superior performance relative to its peers through responsiveness, differentiation, and innovation (Porter, 1985). Organizational competitiveness refers to a firm's ability to maintain superior performance relative to its peers. It is shaped by strategic positioning, resource utilization, and market responsiveness (Akpan et al., 2025). It is a firm's ability to maintain a superior position in the market through strategic capabilities, innovation, and customer value creation. For SMEs, competitiveness is often measured by their ability to respond to market changes, offer unique value propositions, and sustain customer satisfaction (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997). Organizational competitiveness refers to According to ITC (2025), competitive SMEs are those that integrate digital tools, sustainable practices, and strategic agility. Empirical evidence from Rivers State suggests that SMEs with high entrepreneurial orientation—particularly in innovative thinking and opportunity recognition—demonstrate stronger competitive positioning (Adokiye et al., 2017). These firms are more likely to adapt to environmental changes and leverage internal capabilities for strategic advantage.

Organizational Responsiveness

Organizational responsiveness is the capacity of a firm to react swiftly and effectively to internal and external changes. It involves agility, resilience, and proactive decision-making (Olaleye et al., 2024). Responsive SMEs are better equipped to handle crises, adapt to customer needs, and seize emerging opportunities. SMEs that build resilient business models—through digital integration and financial literacy—are better equipped to handle disruptions like inflation or policy shifts (Otokiti et al., 2022). Koporcic et al. (2025) propose a framework that links crisis preparedness, resilience, and coping strategies to SME responsiveness.

Differentiation

Differentiation is a strategic approach where firms distinguish their offerings from competitors through unique features, quality, branding, or customer experience. It allows SMEs to target niche markets and command premium pricing (Omri et al., 2024). Amoako-Gyampah and Acquah (2021) found that differentiation strategies significantly influence financial performance in SMEs, especially when combined with innovation and sustainability. SMEs that embrace sustainability and digital transformation often use these as differentiators to attract eco-conscious consumers.

Empirical Review

Ajor and Alikor (2023) conducted a study on Innovative Mindset and Organizational Sustainability of SMEs in Rivers State. Using a cross-sectional survey of 300 SME managers, they found a positive and significant relationship between innovative thinking and organizational responsiveness. The study revealed that SMEs with a strong innovative mindset were more likely to adapt quickly to environmental changes, implement eco-innovation strategies, and maintain sustainable operations. The Spearman Rank Order Correlation confirmed that innovative thinking enhances responsiveness across economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

Georgewill (2024) examined the link between entrepreneurial innovativeness and business success of SMEs in Rivers State. The study used Spearman's Rank Correlation on data from 313 SMEs and found that innovative thinking significantly influenced differentiation strategies, such as unique product offerings and branding. SMEs that encouraged risk-taking and experimentation were more likely to stand out in competitive markets, leading to increased market share and sales growth.

Akhigbe (2020) explored the relationship between entrepreneurial competencies—including opportunity recognition—and organizational performance of SMEs in Rivers State. The study found a strong positive correlation between opportunity competence and organizational responsiveness. SMEs that actively scanned their environment and leveraged prior knowledge were more agile and responsive to market shifts. The Spearman correlation coefficient ($\rho = 0.521$, $p < 0.05$) confirmed the significance of this relationship.

Amadi and Nuel-Mark (2021) investigated Market Opportunity Recognition and Business Performance among food and beverage SMEs in Rivers State. The study revealed that active search, personal alertness, and prior knowledge—key dimensions of opportunity recognition—had a significant impact on differentiation outcomes such as product uniqueness and market positioning. The Spearman correlation analysis showed strong positive relationships across all dimensions.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to participants across selected organizations. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The questionnaire was pre-tested for clarity and reliability. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS version 4.0. This method is suitable for predictive modeling and theory development, especially with complex models and non-normal data.

Table 1: Reliability Test

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Innovative Thinking	0.842	0.881
Opportunity Recognition	0.861	0.894
Organizational Responsiveness	0.835	0.873
Differentiation	0.846	0.882

The Cronbach's Alpha reliability and Composite reliability values for each of the constructs were greater than 0.7. Therefore, our constructs are reliable.

Table 2: Validity Test

Construct	AVE	Differentiation	Innovative Thinking	Organizational Responsiveness	Opportunity Recognition
Differentiation	0.653	0.808			
Innovative Thinking	0.621	0.312	0.788		
Organizational Responsiveness	0.638	0.387	0.374	0.799	
Opportunity Recognition	0.659	0.303	0.296	0.318	0.812

All AVE values are above 0.5, indicating convergent validity. Diagonal values (in bold) are higher than inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity.

4.0 Analysis and Discussion

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to participants across selected organizations. After data cleaning, 380 valid responses were retained for analysis, representing a 95% response rate. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS version 4.0. 16 observable parameters were used. Each of the 20 observable characteristics is conceptually linked to one of four latent variables. Path coefficients (β values) of .10 to 0.29, .30 to .49 and .50 to 1.0 are weak, moderate and strong correlations, respectively; p-values less than 0.05 level of significance were accepted.

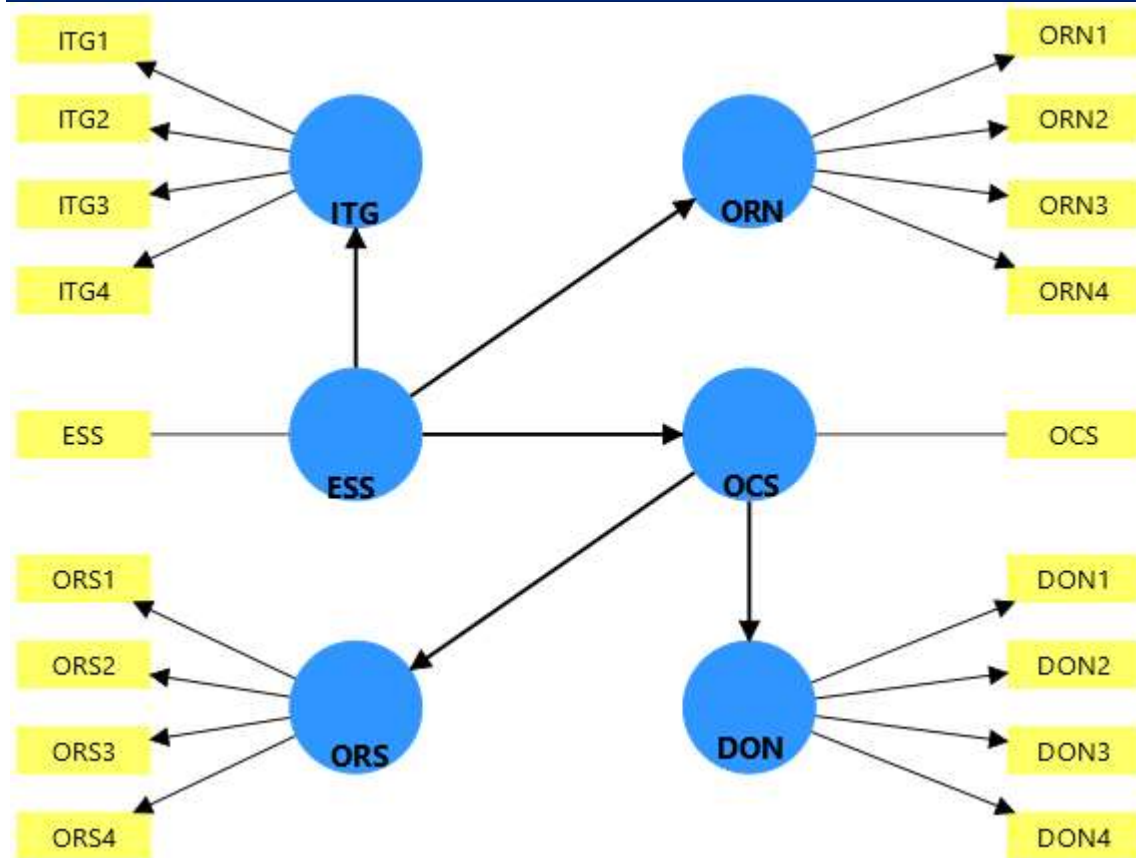


Figure 2: Research Model

The research model in Figure 2 illustrates the direct relationships between Innovative Thinking and Opportunity Recognition (dimensions of Entrepreneurial Skills) with Organizational Responsiveness and Differentiation (measures of Organizational Competitiveness). Entrepreneurial Skills (ESS), Innovative Thinking (ITG), Opportunity Recognition (ORN), Organizational Competitiveness (OCS), Organizational Responsiveness (ORS), and Differentiation (DON).

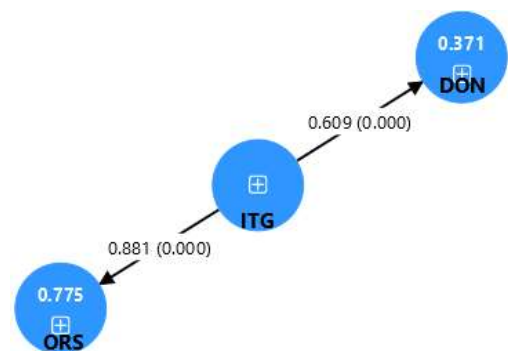


Figure 3: Hypotheses 1 and 2

Table 3: Test of Hypotheses 1 and 2

Hypotheses	Path Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	P Values (p)	Predictive Accuracy (R^2)	Decision
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Ho₁	Innovative thinking and Organizational responsiveness	0.881	0.000	0.775	Reject null hypothesis
Ho₂	Innovative thinking and Differentiation	0.609	0.000	0.371	Reject null hypothesis

Ho₁: Innovative Thinking → Organizational Responsiveness; The path coefficient indicates a strong positive relationship, suggesting that organizations that foster innovative thinking are more agile and responsive to market changes.

Ho₂: Innovative Thinking → Differentiation; The results show a significant positive effect, implying that innovative thinking contributes to unique value propositions and competitive advantage.

Innovative Thinking and Organizational Responsiveness

The analysis revealed a positive and significant relationship between innovative thinking and organizational responsiveness among SMEs in Rivers State ($\beta = 0.881$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that enterprises which cultivate creativity and strategic ideation are more likely to respond rapidly to environmental changes, customer demands, and market uncertainties. This finding corroborates the study by Ajor & Alikor (2023), which demonstrated that SMEs with a strong innovative mindset reported enhanced sustainability and responsiveness across social and economic fronts. Innovative thinking fuels adaptability and proactive decision-making, helping firms survive and thrive in volatile conditions.

Innovative Thinking and Differentiation

The results showed a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.609$, $p < 0.05$) between innovative thinking and differentiation, meaning SMEs that think innovatively tend to offer unique products, branding strategies, and customer experiences. This enhances competitiveness and helps firms stand out in saturated markets. This aligns with Georgewill (2024) who found that entrepreneurial innovativeness in Rivers State SMEs translated into market differentiation and higher success rates. Innovation enables product uniqueness, personalized services, and brand storytelling—all vital for creating competitive barriers.

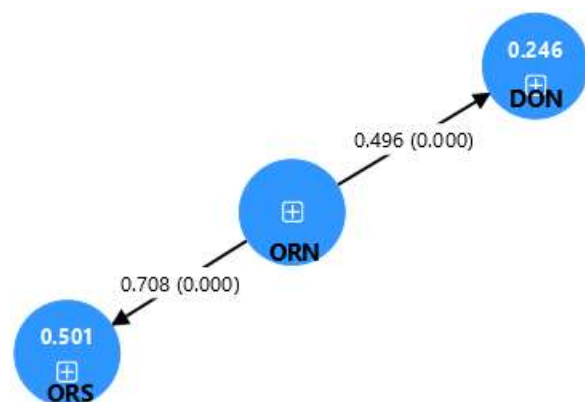


Figure 4: Hypotheses 3 and 4

Table 4: Test of Hypotheses 3 and 4

Hypotheses	Path Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	P Values (p)	Predictive Accuracy (R^2)	Decision
Ho₃	Opportunity recognition and Organizational responsiveness	0.708	0.000	0.501	Reject null hypothesis
Ho₄	Opportunity recognition and Differentiation	0.496	0.000	0.246	Reject null hypothesis

Ho₃: Opportunity Recognition → Organizational Responsiveness; A positive and significant path reveals that recognizing market opportunities enhances an organization's ability to respond effectively.

Ho₄: Opportunity Recognition → Differentiation; The findings confirm that opportunity recognition drives strategic differentiation, enabling firms to stand out in competitive environments.

Opportunity Recognition and Organizational Responsiveness

The study confirmed a strong and significant relationship between opportunity recognition and organizational responsiveness ($\beta = 0.708$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that SMEs that actively scan their environment and recognize viable business prospects are better equipped to respond swiftly to market needs and changes. This finding supports the study by Akhigbe (2020) which identified opportunity recognition as a key competence contributing to agile and resilient behavior among SMEs in Rivers State. Entrepreneurs who use intuition, prior experience, and market signals effectively tend to anticipate disruptions and act proactively.

Opportunity Recognition and Differentiation

The results revealed a positive relationship ($\beta = 0.496$, $p < 0.05$) between opportunity recognition and differentiation. SMEs that can spot unmet needs and latent customer desires often translate these insights into unique offerings and strategic market positioning. This complements findings by Amadi & Nuel-Mark (2021), who emphasized that active search, alertness, and entrepreneurial foresight were instrumental in driving product uniqueness and performance among food and beverage SMEs in Rivers State.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine the influence of entrepreneurial skills—specifically innovative thinking and opportunity recognition—on two dimensions of organizational competitiveness: organizational responsiveness and differentiation among SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria. Drawing on empirical data and supported by theoretical and statistical analysis using PLS-SEM, the findings reveal that both dimensions of entrepreneurial skills significantly and positively impact the competitive capabilities of SMEs. Overall, the study concludes that entrepreneurial cognition—through innovative thinking and opportunity recognition—is a critical determinant of organizational competitiveness in the SME sector. In the context of Rivers State, where SMEs face infrastructural, financial, and regulatory challenges, these skills serve as strategic levers for survival, growth, and differentiation. The following recommendations are put forward:

- i. SMEs should invest in cultivating an innovation culture—encouraging brainstorming, experimentation, and risk tolerance—to boost responsiveness.
- ii. SMEs should embrace design thinking and continuous improvement strategies to carve a distinct identity and increase customer loyalty.
- iii. SME managers must sharpen their environmental scanning techniques and develop cognitive agility to improve real-time responsiveness.
- iv. SMEs must continually monitor trends and customer preferences, translating insights into tailored solutions that provide value beyond price.

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