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NETWORKING CAPABILITY AND CORPORATE RESILIENCE OF SMES IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
The study explores the association between networking capability and corporate resilience of SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria. The problem of the research stem from the inability of SMEs to intentionally create, maintain, and take advantage of connections with external role players such as regulators, suppliers, customers, partners and institutions to access knowledge, opportunities, resources and external information which will guarantee their regular operations in the face of turbulent physical disruptions. In solving this problem, four research questions and four research hypotheses were asked and formulated respectively. Thus, networking capability was operationalised through relationship building and information exchange, while corporate resilience was measured with adaptive capacity and recovery speed. The cross-sectional survey was adopted. Studied accessible population comprised 395 SMEs in Rivers State. A sample of 196 respondents was derived using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table. The primary data was obtained using a well-structured questionnaire. Spearman Rank Order correlation coefficient was used for the analysis. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between networking capability dimensions and corporate resilience of SMEs. The study concluded that networking capability correlates with the resilience of SMEs in Rivers State. The study suggests enhancing relationship building and information exchange for the resilience of SMEs in Rivers State will guarantee regular business in the face of physical disruptions.

KEYWORDS: *Networking Capability, Relationship Building, Information Exchange, Corporate Resilience , Adaptive Capacity, Recovery Speed/*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The small and medium-sized organisations (SMEs), the central engines of employment, have emerged to be very important determinants of today's economy. They are vulnerable organisations that fall between micro-enterprises and large corporations in terms of size, resources, and scale of operations that provide job opportunities, encourage new ideas and values, and help in improving the gross domestic product, but lack the required skills, have weak digital infrastructure, and have fragile supply links and resources that could enable them to deal with unforeseen challenges when they arise. This makes them vulnerable to attacks of economic downturns, supply chain problems and insufficient funding (Ozanne et al., 2022).

The weakness of SMEs during the Covid-19pandemic pinpoints the importance of corporate resilience as a strategic skill to deal with shocks and stay alive, as many SMEs experienced sudden demand collapses, cash-flow crises and disruption to inputs and logistics that threatened business continuity (Du et al., 2022; Hossain et al., 2022). An organisation must have the strategic foresight and ability to plan, operate and recover from bad occurrences while keeping operations going (Kotsios et al., 2023). Therefore, nurturing resilience has crucial precedence for SMEs that plan to survive. Corporate resilience, the firms capability to expect, assimilate, accommodate and recover from disruptions is desirable and essential for survival in a developing environments, as resilience decrease the chance of perpetual closure, conserve jobs, and enhances the socio-economic role of the SMEs to the societies (OECD, 2023; Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2023).

Resilience protects and stabilises the firms' core trading operations during shocks, facilitating quicker recovery and lowering the long-term economic symptoms. Organisations with adaptive practices, who are able to make use of technological innovations in the form of digital payment adoption, rapid cost reconfiguration and diversified sales channels, experience little decline in revenue and faster re-establishment of operations than those who are not (Nan & Park, 2022; Du et al., 2022). Resilience can be seen as an insurance mechanism with buffers to counter shocks in finance and operational processes (Hossain et al., 2022; OECD, 2023). Resilience supports innovative capabilities and

adaptive business models and promotes competitive advantage in rapidly changing markets. Strengthening SME resilience decreases the general operational risk, sustains increased job opportunities and stabilises the firms' supply chains.

Networking capability, a driver of resilience, has been a topic of interest for researchers. It is the firm's ability to identify, build and manage external and internal relationships for knowledge sharing, innovation and collaboration among suppliers, customers, donor agencies, international organisations, industry peers, private sector actors and institutions to enhance efficiency and access critical resources, services and information (Majid et al., 2021). Utilising and developing network capabilities have enabled SMEs to subdue resource constraints, enhance flexibility, and improve sensitiveness to environmental uncertainties. Ozanne et al. (2022) suggested that SMEs with powerful networking capabilities have the privilege of sensing and seizing opportunities, responding to market changes, and coordinating adaptive strategies, which in turn strengthens their resilience.

Furthermore, digital modification has intensified the importance of networking capability in reinforcing resilience, as the use of e-commerce, digital platforms, and online ecosystems has grown SMEs' networks beyond their usual geographical limit, opened up new markets, and allowed them to collaborate with many partners (Hokmabadi et al., 2024). It makes it easier for SMEs to share information and resources, be more adaptive and flexible, and adjust to changes quickly. Hence, networking in the digital age is progressively regarded as a dynamical capability that promotes resilience and competitiveness (Majid et al., 2021; Hokmabadi et al., 2024). Despite several studies on networking capability (Hokmabadi et al., 2024; Kotsios et al., 2023; Ozanne et al., 2022; Majid et al., 2021) and corporate resilience (OECD, 2023; Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2023; Du et al., 2022; Hossain et al., 2022), respectively, gaps exist in the literature on the influence of networking ability on the resilience of SMEs in Rivers State. This study will bridge the observed gap in knowledge and offer explanations for how digital networking could make SMEs more resilient in an unstable business environment.

1.1 Statement of the Problems

Resilience is indispensable for commercialism continuity, but many SMEs in Nigeria have poor corporate resilience and structural and contextual situations that make them more undefended compared to large corporations. There are constant business interruptions, minor improvements aftershocks, and higher fragility during economic stress. The key factors contributing to poor resilience of SMEs are inadequate funding or access to credit facilities. Dependence on a narrow market, low technological adoption, weak strategic planning and management, and other external environmental challenges such as poor infrastructure, regulatory burdens, political instability, and policy uncertainty create additional vulnerabilities that make these firms struggle to adjust to such external shocks.

Amadi (2025) and Orujekwe et al. (2024) suggested that poor resilience in SMEs is as a result of weak financial status, low adoption of adaptive practices, resistance to change and lack of preparedness against unforeseen challenges. Studies of some SMEs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic show that a large proportion of the SMEs failed or suffered losses as they lacked contingency planning, access to credit, and integration into supportive networks (Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2023; OECD, 2023). When resilience is weak in organisations, their survival becomes threatened by inadequate cash flow, inventory losses, supply and distribution disruptions and poor outcomes that lead quickly to downsizing or permanent closure (Onjewu, 2022; Amin et al., 2023).

The direct consequences of poor resilience are high business mortality rates, loss of jobs and income in local communities where SMEs are key employers, increased insecurity for households that depend on SME incomes, reduced competitiveness in both domestic and global markets and stunted economic contribution that undermines their potential as drivers of innovation and growth.Poor corporate resilience also destroys future prospects and undermines SMEs' long-term competitiveness, sustainability and innovative capability. Often the SMEs cannot absorb shocks, their productivity is low, and services are very poor; they have low incentives and fewer resources for investment in digital tools, poor product or process innovations, and inadequate market development required to compete in an evolving market (Gliga, 2023; Tariq, 2024).

Although some studies have revealed that resilient SMEs rapidly take advantage of online sales as a resource for new revenue streams during the pandemic, those without these adaptive behaviours contracted market share and missed opportunities for learning and growth (Hokmabadi et al., 2024; Ozanne et al., 2022).Governments, stakeholders, development partners and networking groups have enforced various measures to strengthen SMEs, but the doggedness

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of these problems makes the interventions ineffective. Across Nigeria, policy responses included grant/loan schemes, emergency credit windows, career development programmes and targeted entrepreneurship support to improve the liquidity of the SMEs and build capacity (Rivers State Government, 2023; Onjewu, 2022). Yet, these interventions have not yielded substantial results, indicating gaps in resolving the problem, bureaucratic impediments, poor targeting and limited emphasis on relational or network-building activities that help firms access autonomous resources quickly (Onjewu, 2022; OECD, 2023). Despite the projection of some loan schemes and empowerment initiatives, many SMEs remain disconnected from sustained mentorship, market linkages and peer support that are crucial for converting short-term aid into lasting resilience (IIARD report; Amadi, 2025).

1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study examines the relationship between networking capability and corporate resilience. The study:

i. Explores the relationship between relationship building and adaptive capacity.
ii. Determines the link between relationship building and recovery speed.
iii. Assesses the bond between information exchange and adaptive capacity.
iv. Investigates the association between information exchange and recovery speed.

1.3 Research Questions

i. What is the association between relationship building and adaptive capacity?
ii. How does relationship building relate to the recovery speed?
iii. How does information exchange relate to the adaptive capacity?
iv. What is the linkage between information exchange and recovery speed?

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between relationship building and adaptive capacity.
H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between relationship building and recovery speed.
H_{03}: There is no significant relationship between information exchange and adaptive capacity.
H_{04}: There is no significant relationship between information exchange and recovery speed.

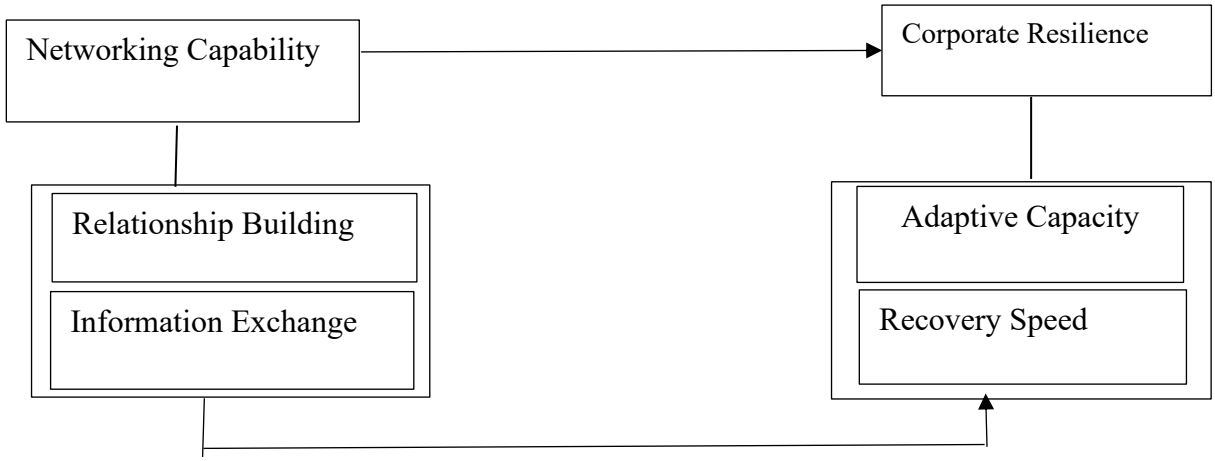


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Adapted from Source: Adapted from Majid, Yasir, and Yousaf (2021); Ozanne, Chowdhury, Prayag, and Mollenkopf (2022).

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Networking capability

Networking capability refers to efforts by the organisation to intentionally create, maintain and take advantage of connections with external role players, such as regulators, suppliers, customers, partners and institutions, to access knowledge, opportunities, resources and external information. It is a dynamic managerial competence that businesses use to extend their resource base and sensing capacity beyond the firm's walls (Mitręga, 2023; Tariq, 2024; Gligă et al., 2023). This involves business activities such as relationship management, network scanning, partner selection and boundary spanning. Strong networking capability is more than just having many interactions with people;

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it involves purposeful, strategic and dynamic connections with networks for mutual benefit. SMEs often lack the required scale and internal resources to succeed, so they often rely on external relationships to fill capability gaps. This gap may be technical know-how, finance, or market intelligence. Networking capability is dynamic: networks evolve over time, and firms must update, reconfigure, or throw off ties as contexts change. Networking capability is not just the quantity of relationships but also the quality, strategic orientation, flexibility, and the ability to mobilise those relationships when needed, as they are valuable and assist in having access to credit and market intelligence and enhance collective problem-solving that reduces vulnerability and builds adaptive capacity (Gligă et al., 2023).

Relationship Building

Relationship building refers to the practices and processes of promoting commitment, trust, and reciprocity with key stakeholders (suppliers, customers, community actors, and peers). Relationship quality, which is characterised by reliance, communication and equity, is the foundation for collaborative behaviour, which enables partners to be resilient, share risk, coordinate under stress, and co-create solutions (Gligă et al., 2023; Ozanne et al., 2022). When an organisation has thoughtful, steady relationships with all stakeholders, it can prevent shocks, rally support, and act as a passageway for useful knowledge. Gligă et al. (2023) emphasise that relationship building is not purely affective but also procedural and strategic and can thus be planned and strengthened by managers. When SMEs have quality relationships with the stakeholders, they experience quicker design of channels, better supply continuity, and powerful customer retention (McCann, 2023; Gligă et al., 2023).

Information Exchange

Information exchange refers to how organisations transfer knowledge between firms and their stakeholders. Specifically, it shows how a firm develops, interprets, disseminates, and integrates knowledge from external sources and internal persons. The knowledge could be about his market information, technological opportunities and disposition, regulatory updates, and customer feedback. When information is exchanged through a network, it lowers doubt, helps in identifying opportunities, and speeds up problem diagnosis during disruptions. In a turbulent environment, effective information exchange requires both channels and interpretive capacity (Tariq, 2024; Ozanne et al., 2022), as timely and relevant information can make the difference between strategic foresight and being blindsided by change.

Corporate Resilience

Corporate resilience is the firm's ability to foresee, assimilate, accommodate and recover from turbulent physical phenomena while maintaining the basic functions and competitive advantage. It combines elements of preparedness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, learning and the outcome of multiple capabilities and organisational processes (Hokmabadi et al., 2024; Cong et al., 2024). Resilience involves a survival imperative to ensure the continued existence of firms in the face of internal and external pressures and a strategic asset through providing firms with unique capabilities that are difficult for competitors to imitate. It preserves continuity during shocks and positions the firm to exploit post-shock opportunities. Preparedness has to do with the capability to identify risk and carry out contingency planning for risk. Absorptive capacity is an organization's ability to recognise the value of new external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it effectively to achieve a competitive advantage or improved performance, while adaptive capacity is the ability to adjust, modify, and reorganise its operations, strategies, and resources in response to internal and external changes while continuing to function effectively.

Adaptive Capacity

Adaptive capacity is a critical component of organisational resilience and reflects the degree to which a firm can cope with uncertainties, shocks, or disruptions and modify structures, processes, and resources in response to changed conditions. Organisations with strong adaptive capacity are better able to respond to crises such as supply chain disruptions, economic downturns, or technological shifts by assembling resources and adopting flexible strategies. Capacity is not just reactive but also proactive, as it comprises the foresight to foresee change and prepare for future challenges. It is propelled by leadership potency, knowledge sharing, collaboration among the stakeholders, and investment in human and social capital (Carmona-Lavado & Cuevas-Rodríguez, 2023). It includes managerial decision speed, modular operational processes, and a culture that tolerates experimentation (Ozanne et al., 2022; Kukkamala & Koporčić, 2024).

Recovery Speed

Recovery speed refers to a firm's ability to bounce back after facing difficulty. In SME operations, recovery speed is essential since SMEs are known for funding limitations and limited resources to withstand prolonged downtime. When an organisation rapidly recovers from its adversary, it enhances trust and loyalty, stabilises the supply chain, and boosts market competitiveness. Abubakar & Bala's (2022) study shows that organisations that promote effective contingency planning, proactive risk management, and adaptive strategies have a higher tendency of recovering speedily from operational challenges. (Abubakar & Bala, 2022)

Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) was propounded by **Jay Barney in 1991.** Barney (1991) suggested that organisations can accomplish and sustain competitive advantage by having in their possession resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Networking capability, which was operationalised in two dimensions, namely, relationship building and information exchange is a strategic intangible resource that enhances SMEs' knowledge competence, access to market intelligence, and external support, which strongly builds their resilience. These relational networks and trust-based exchanges are hard for competitors to duplicate, making them an incomparable source of adaptability and recovery in challenging environment. The theory explains how networking capability strengthens corporate resilience among SMEs through building strong stakeholder relationships and facilitating timely information exchange. This process enables the SMEs to develop intangible assets that enhance both adaptive capacity and recovery speed to protect them against environmental shocks and enhance long-term sustainability.

Empirical Review

Seow et al. (2024) investigate building tourism SMEs' business resilience through adaptive capability, supply chain collaboration and strategic human resources. The theory underpinning the study was Dynamic Capability Theory. The study analyses seven hypotheses using Smart PLS software version 4.210 SME owners/managers participated in the survey in Malaysia. The study's findings suggest that business collaboration and human resource development are vital resources for enhancing capabilities that foster business resilience in tourism SMEs. The study concludes that the resilience of SMEs relates to their adaptive capability, supply chain collaboration and strategic human resources. Putra et al.'s (2025) qualitative study uses thematic analysis to systematically review literature on SME management practices and community resilience. The study findings show that visionary leadership, adaptive management styles, strategic foresight, and risk assessment are crucial for SME resilience. The study emphasises integrating theoretical insights with practical implications to promote apprehension of SME resilience and its function in building resilient communities.

Zighanet et al. (2022) study explores operational practices adopted to support small and medium-sized enterprises' resilience in the face of coronavirus disease 2019. The study's qualitative data were collected through 43 semi-structured interviews with SME entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial resource providers in Jordan. The findings revealed that entrepreneurial orientation enhances SMEs' resilience to survive major disruptions and threats.

Pongtanalert & Assarut (2022) investigate how SMEs with limited resources overcome crises. The multiple case studies select four hostels as representative cases of business resilience during September 2020–2021. The findings revealed that the hostels enhance social capital through an entrepreneurial mindset to reshape the business during the COVID-19 pandemic, and social capital was employed to develop a new business model and business sustainability. The findings suggest that SMEs should inculcate a good entrepreneurial mindset and utilise their social capital and create business innovation and sustainability to survive any crisis.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Research Design- the research adopted a cross-sectional survey based on the fact that the elements under study were not under the control of the researcher

Population for the study- the accessible population for the study comprised of 395 SMEs in Rivers State.

Sample size- the sample size for the study was 196 respondents derived from the population using krejcie and Morgan (1970) table.

Method of data collection- the primary data for the research was obtained using a well-structured questionnaire.

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Measurement of variables- Each construct was measured with a set of five statement items which involved relationship building and information exchange as dimensions of the independent variable, while the criterion variable, corporate resilience, was measured using two dimensions: adaptive capacity and recovery speed.
Method of data analysis- the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient statistical tool was used for the analysis.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire Distribution- out **of the** 196 copies of the questionnaire distributed, only 187(92.9%) copies were returned, and this constituted the valid questionnaire used in the analysis.
Hypotheses Testing

Table 1: Correlations between relationship building and the measures of corporate resilience

			Relationship Building	Adaptive Capacity	Recovery Speed
Spearman's Rho	Relationship Building	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.665**	.680**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	187	187	187
	Adaptive Capacity	Correlation Coefficient	.665**	1.000	.650**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	187	187	187
	Recovery Speed	Correlation Coefficient	.680**	.650**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	187	187	187

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS Output, 2025.

Relationship building and adaptive capacity : The hypothesis tested to assess the relationship between relationship building and adaptive capacity showed a significant and positive relationship. The Spearman's rho value is 0.665 ($p = 0.000$). The coefficient of determination (r^2) is 0.442, which implied that, 44.2% of the variation in adaptive capacity can be explained by relationship building. Based on these findings, the null hypothesis (Ho_1) was rejected. This indicates a strong significant and positive relationship between relationship building and adaptive capacity.

Relationship building and recovery speed : The Spearman's rho value of 0.680 ($p = 0.000$). The r^2 value of 0.462 suggests that 46.2% of the variance in recovery speed is attributable to relationship building. Consequently, the null hypothesis (Ho_2) is rejected. This confirms a strong and positive relationship between relationship building and recovery speed .

Table 2: Correlations between information exchange and the measures of corporate resilience

			Information Exchange	Adaptive Capacity	Recovery Speed
Spearman's rho	Information Exchange	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.625**	.645**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	187	187	187
	Adaptive Capacity	Correlation Coefficient	.625**	1.000	.615**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	187	187	187
	Recovery Speed	Correlation Coefficient	.645**	.615**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	187	187	187

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS Output, 2025.

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Information Exchange and Adaptive Capacity: The Spearman's rho value is 0.625 (p = 0.000). The coefficient of determination (r^2) is 0.391, indicating that 39.1% of the variation in adaptive capacity is explained by information exchange Given this result, the null hypothesis (Ho_3) is rejected. This demonstrates a strong and significant positive relationship between information exchange and adaptive capacity.

Information Exchange and Recovery Speed : The Spearman's rho value is 0.645 (p = 0.000). The r^2 value is 0.41.6 indicating that information exchange accounts for 41.6% of the variation in recovery speed . Based on this evidence, the null hypothesis (Ho_4) is rejected. This suggests that there is a strong significant and positive relationship between information exchange and recovery speed of SMEs in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

The study findings show a significant positive association between networking capability and corporate resilience. Relationship building and information exchange relate to the measures of corporate resilience in terms of adaptive capacity and recovery speed. The findings revealed that firms with stronger networking capability are better positioned to withstand challenges and recover more swiftly.

Hypothesis one tested the association between relationship building and adaptive capacity. The correlation coefficient ($\rho = 0.665$, $p = 0.000$) revealed a strong positive relationship, with 42.5% of the variation in adaptive capacity explained by relationship building. This suggests that SMEs which cultivate strong relationships with the stakeholders (customers, suppliers and partners) often adjust swiftly to unexpected market and environmental changes. This conforms with Akinwale and Adepoju (2021), who suggested that collaborative human relationships enable firms to adjust faster by accessing diverse knowledge and resources. Similarly, Adegbite et al. (2023) emphasise that sustained relational networks enhance strategic flexibility, thereby fostering adaptive capacity.

The second hypothesis (Ho_2) investigated the link between relationship building and recovery speed. The correlation analysis ($\rho = 0.680$, $p = 0.000$) revealed that 46.2% of the variance in recovery speed is attributable to relationship building, indicating a strong positive relationship. The result means that SMEs with strong stakeholder relationships are more likely to rejuvenate business acclivity quickly after disruptions. This result agrees with Edeh and Nwachukwu (2022), that social capital, a measure of business relationships, promotes organisations' ability to mobilise resources and recover promptly from crises. The result also agrees with the resilience theory, which argues that organisations embedded in strong networks recover faster due to access to trust, support, and shared information.

The third hypothesis focused on information exchange and adaptive capacity. The result ($\rho = 0.625$, $p = 0.000$) indicates that information exchange accounts for 52.6% of the variation in adaptive capacity. This study revealed that SMEs that share and receive information with stakeholders are flexible and adaptive to changing market environments. This conforms with Musa and Bello (2021), that free flow of information enhances better decision-making and promotes corporate adaptability. Furthermore, continuous information flow enhances proactive rather than reactive responses to environmental changes (Nguyen & Nham, 2023).

The fourth hypothesis examined the bond amid information exchange and recovery speed. The results ($\rho = 0.645$, $p = 0.000$) suggest a strong and positive relationship, with 41.6% of the variance in recovery speed explained by information exchange. This shows that good communication with stakeholders enhances faster recovery speed after encountering challenges. The result agrees with Okpara and Chikwe (2024) that information sharing enhances crisis response speed and reduces downtime in operations. Overall, the study reveals that networking capability (relationship building and information exchange) significantly contributes to corporate resilience (adaptive capacity and recovery speed).

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study explores the relationship between networking capability and corporate resilience among SMEs in Rivers State. The predictor variable (networking capability) dimensions were relationship building and information exchange. The criterion variable, on the other hand, was measured with adaptive capacity and recovery speed. The study findings reveal a positive significant relationship between the dimensions of networking capability and corporate resilience, revealing that SMEs that enhance relationship building with stakeholders and information exchange efficiency are better equipped to withstand shocks, adjust to environmental changes, and restore high process operation swiftly, as corporate resilience is not only an internal organisational attribute but also a function of external influences and

collaboration. The study concluded that there is a strong positive relationship between networking capability and corporate resilience among SMEs in Rivers State.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The SMEs should strengthen their long-term relationships with all the stakeholders (business partners, customers, suppliers, etc.) by engaging in strategic trust-building initiatives and loyalty programmes to provide access to different resources and knowledge, which promote their adaptability to future changes in the market and the environment.
2. The SME entrepreneur should build crisis-support partnerships with key stakeholders and community groups to have a safety net during challenging times that swiftly follow disruptions more quickly after shocks.
3. The SMEs should promote efficient communication platforms for timely information sharing with stakeholders to enhance firms' ability to make proactive decisions and remain adaptive and flexible in a changing environment.
4. The SMEs should enhance trust, customer loyalty, transparency and feedback mechanisms during crises through engagement in open communication with employees and all stakeholders for accurate information exchange to foster trust and coordinated action, thereby accelerating recovery speed and restoring operations efficiently.

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