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The Economic Impact of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Osun State

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the economic impact of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Osun State, Nigeria. SMEs play a crucial role in fostering economic development, generating employment opportunities, and driving innovation within the local economy. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with SME owners. The findings reveal that SMEs are vital contributors to local employment and economic diversification, significantly enhancing the region's economic landscape. However, the study also identifies several challenges SMEs face, including limited access to financial resources and regulatory hurdles that hinder growth. These obstacles underscore the urgent need for supportive policies and initiatives to bolster SME growth and sustainability in Osun State. Ultimately, the research advocates a collaborative effort between government and the private sector to create a more conducive environment for SMEs to thrive.

Keywords: *SMEs; Economic Impact; Osun State; Job Creation; Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in the economies of many countries, particularly in developing regions such as Osun State, Nigeria. They are widely recognised for their potential to drive economic growth, create jobs, and foster innovation (Ayyagari, Beck, & Demirgüç-Kunt, 2007). Despite their substantial contributions to the economy, SMEs often face significant challenges that hinder their growth and limit their ability to realise their full potential (Beck, Demirgüç-Kunt, & Maksimovic, 2005).

Globally, SMEs are a major economic force. According to the World Bank (2020), they account for approximately 90 per cent of businesses and more than half of employment worldwide. In Nigeria, SMEs are recognised as a vital component of economic development, contributing significantly to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and serving as a primary source of employment. They play a key role across sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services, all of which are essential to economic diversification.

In Osun State, SMEs are vital to local economies, creating jobs and diversifying economic activity beyond traditional sectors. Yet research on the specific economic impact of SMEs in Osun State remains limited. Existing literature does not fully capture these businesses' contributions to the state's economy, nor does it thoroughly address the challenges they face.

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This study aims to fill this gap by examining the role of SMEs in Osun State's economy, identifying the key barriers they encounter, and recommending policy interventions to enhance their growth and sustainability.

The Importance of SMEs

SMEs are foundational to economic stability and growth in developing economies. They play a multifaceted role in enhancing economic well-being, which can be seen in the following ways:

i. *Job Creation:* SMEs are instrumental in providing employment in Nigeria, offering jobs to millions, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas where large-scale industries are scarce. Their ability to absorb labour helps reduce unemployment and alleviate poverty, thereby contributing to social stability (Ayyagari et al., 2007).
ii. *Economic Diversification:* By operating across sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services, SMEs help diversify the economy, making it more resilient to external shocks. For example, in Osun State, SMEs in the agricultural sector add value to raw materials through processing and marketing, thereby expanding the state's economic base.
iii. *Innovation and Adaptability:* Compared with larger firms, SMEs are more agile and can adapt quickly to changes in market conditions. This flexibility enables them to introduce new products and services in response to shifting consumer demands, thereby driving innovation across the economy. Their smaller scale allows for more rapid decision-making, which can be a significant advantage in competitive markets (Beck et al., 2005).

Challenges Faced by SMEs

While SMEs have considerable potential to spur economic development, they also encounter a range of challenges that impede their growth and sustainability. These challenges are particularly pronounced in regions like Osun State, where economic development is still evolving.

iv. *Access to Finance:* Securing adequate funding is one of the most significant barriers for SMEs. Traditional financial institutions often impose stringent lending criteria, high interest rates, and collateral requirements that many small businesses cannot meet. As a result, SMEs frequently lack the capital needed for expansion or even day-to-day operations. Limited access to finance prevents them from investing in new technologies or scaling up their production capacity (World Bank, 2020).
v. *Regulatory Hurdles*: Nigeria's regulatory environment can be complex and burdensome for SMEs. Businesses often face multiple layers of bureaucracy, leading to delays in obtaining licences, permits, and other necessary approvals. These obstacles can increase operational costs and reduce SME efficiency, affecting competitiveness and growth.
vi. *Market Access Constraints*: SMEs also struggle to access larger markets due to limited distribution networks, inadequate infrastructure, and competition from established firms. This limited market reach constrains their ability to increase revenues and achieve economies of scale. For instance, many small businesses in Osun State operate

in local markets without the capacity to expand nationally or internationally, limiting their growth potential and profitability (Ayyagari et al., 2007).

Thus, SMEs are undoubtedly crucial to economic growth and development, particularly in emerging economies such as Osun State, Nigeria. They provide employment, contribute to economic diversification, and drive innovation. However, for SMEs to reach their full potential, they must address challenges such as access to finance, regulatory complexities, and market access issues. By implementing targeted policies and interventions, such as financial support programmes, regulatory reforms, and initiatives to improve market access, the government and relevant stakeholders can help create a more conducive environment for SMEs to thrive.

Statement of the Problem

The economic landscape in Nigeria, particularly in Osun State, has seen a troubling trend: a sharp decline in the number of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in recent years. According to recent data, the number of SMEs operating in the country fell by 45 per cent, from 246,200 in 2020 to 170,098 by 2022 (Tunji, 2024). This steep decline is alarming because SMEs are vital to economic development, contributing significantly to employment, innovation, and economic resilience (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023).

In Osun State, where SMEs have traditionally played a critical role in driving economic activity and creating jobs, the decline in the number of these enterprises is a serious concern. Despite an observed increase in the employment rate, the dwindling number of active SMEs suggests that many businesses are struggling to survive harsh economic conditions rather than scaling up or stabilising. This situation may stem from economic instability, unfavourable policy and regulatory environments, limited access to finance, infrastructural deficiencies, and the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Nairametrics, 2024).

The decline in SMEs not only threatens Osun State's economic diversification and sustainability but also increases the risk of higher unemployment in the future. Given that SMEs are considered the backbone of economic growth, the continued shrinkage of this sector could impede efforts to achieve substantial economic development and resilience. This troubling trend highlights the need for targeted policy interventions and support measures to revitalise the SME sector in Osun State and foster economic recovery and sustainable growth (NBS, 2023).

Research Objectives

This study aims to fill the gap in understanding the specific economic impacts of SMEs in Osun State. The primary objectives are to:

i. Assess SMEs’ contributions to employment and GDP in Osun State.
ii. Identify the challenges SMEs face in the region.
iii. Suggest potential policy interventions to support the growth and sustainability of SMEs.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) significantly impact economic development, especially in developing regions. Understanding their role in economies like Osun State, Nigeria, involves examining their contributions, challenges, and factors influencing their growth. This section reviews recent empirical studies on SMEs, identifies gaps in the literature, and discusses relevant theoretical frameworks.

Empirical Review

Several studies have investigated the impact of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) on economic development, revealing significant findings across various dimensions such as economic contribution, growth barriers, and policy influence.

Adebayo and Ibrahim (2023) examined SMEs' contribution to Nigeria's economic growth between 2010 and 2020. Using time-series data, they applied econometric methods to assess the relationship between SME activity and the country's GDP. Their findings showed that SMEs contributed about 48 per cent to Nigeria's GDP and accounted for nearly 84 per cent of private-sector employment, highlighting the sector's critical role in job creation. However, they identified access to finance as a significant challenge, with limited funding options and high collateral requirements restricting the growth of many SMEs.

Similarly, Olalekan et al. (2022) examined the impact of government policies on SME growth in south-western Nigeria, using a combination of surveys and policy analysis. Their study found mixed outcomes, with some policies, such as support for entrepreneurial training and grants, stimulating growth, while others, particularly excessive taxation and regulatory requirements, posed substantial barriers to business expansion. Based on their findings, the authors recommended policy reforms to reduce regulatory burdens and improve the tax environment for SMEs.

Another study examined the challenges SMEs face in accessing credit in Osun State. The research utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the relationship between credit availability and business expansion. The study identified major obstacles, including a lack of collateral, high interest rates, and stringent loan application processes, which hinder SMEs from securing financing and expanding their operations (Nwankwo & Nweke, 2021).

Some studies have also examined the market-access challenges SMEs face in Nigeria through surveys of business owners across sectors. The study found that limited access to larger markets and inadequate marketing strategies significantly constrained business growth. Adeoye recommended leveraging digital platforms and online marketing tools to expand SMEs' market reach and visibility, helping them compete more effectively in national and international markets (Adeoye, 2023).

Meanwhile, Olawale and Garba (2021) assessed the impact of infrastructural development on SME performance in Nigeria, employing a cross-sectional analysis across various sectors. Their findings indicated that poor infrastructure, such as unreliable electricity supply and inadequate road networks, adversely affected business operations and profitability. They suggested that prioritising infrastructure improvements could enhance SME productivity and economic output.

In another dimension, Eze and Nduka (2022) surveyed innovation among Nigerian SMEs, focusing on the role of research and development (R&D). Their analysis found that although many SMEs have innovative potential, insufficient R&D funding remains a barrier to further growth and product development. The study recommended increasing government support for R&D initiatives, including grants and incentives for SMEs investing in innovative projects.

The study examined the relationship between training, skill development, and SME productivity in Nigeria using regression analysis. The results indicated that continuous training programmes and skill development significantly improved operational efficiency and business outcomes, suggesting that investment in human capital development is vital for SME growth (Bello & Salawu, 2023).

In another study, Chukwu and Dike (2023) examined how technology adoption influences SME growth in Nigeria, using a mixed-methods approach to assess the correlation between digital tool use and business productivity. Their findings showed a strong positive relationship, with SMEs that adopted digital tools such as accounting software and online marketing experiencing higher growth rates. The authors argued that prioritising digital skills training for SME owners and employees would be essential to fostering a technology-driven business environment.

Studies have also examined the role of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in enhancing SME growth in Nigeria through an econometric analysis of capital inflows and SME performance indicators. The study found that FDI increased capital availability and facilitated technology transfer, thereby benefiting SME expansion and competitiveness. The author suggested encouraging more FDI in sectors with high SME activity to maximise its positive impact (Onyeukwu, 2021).

Adamu and Musa (2023) examined the effects of financial inclusion on SME development in rural Nigeria through a case study. Their research showed that financial inclusion initiatives, such as mobile banking and microfinance services, significantly improved SMEs' access to capital, resulting in higher business growth and economic development in rural areas. They recommended expanding financial inclusion programmes to reach more underserved regions.

The reviewed studies consistently highlight the crucial role of SMEs in economic development, particularly in job creation, economic diversification, and fostering innovation. The studies identified several key variables that affect SME growth and performance, including access to finance, government policies, market access, infrastructure, training, technology adoption, R&D funding, FDI, and financial inclusion.

Identified Gap in the Literature

Although numerous studies emphasise SMEs' contributions to Nigeria's economic development, a notable gap remains in understanding SMEs' specific economic impact on urban infrastructure development in regional economies such as Osun State. While research has largely focused on nationwide issues, it has paid little attention to regional disparities in SME growth and their role in shaping urban infrastructure. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how SMEs influence sustainable urban infrastructure development in Osun State, considering the regional context and sector-specific dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical foundation is grounded in Endogenous Growth Theory, which holds that economic growth is driven primarily by internal factors such as human capital, innovation, and knowledge rather than external forces (Romer, 1990). This theory is well suited to analysing SMEs' role in urban infrastructure development because it emphasises investment in innovation, technology, and education, which are critical for enhancing productivity and fostering sustainable economic growth.

In the context of SMEs, the theory suggests that businesses contribute to growth by introducing new products, processes, and technologies, thereby improving the overall economic structure. By promoting urban infrastructure development, SMEs can generate spillover effects that stimulate other economic sectors and enhance the quality of life in urban areas.

The Resource-Based View (RBV) also offers insights into how SMEs can leverage their unique resources, such as knowledge, skills, and entrepreneurial capabilities, to build competitive advantages that foster sustainable development (Barney, 1991). This framework helps explain how SMEs utilise available resources to overcome constraints and drive infrastructure development in Osun State.

By employing these theories, the study analyses the factors influencing SME growth and their impact on urban infrastructure, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the economic role SMEs play in regional development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively examine the economic contributions and challenges of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Osun State, Nigeria. Data collection employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a well-rounded understanding of the subject.

Quantitative Data:

A structured survey was administered to 200 SME owners across the manufacturing, services, and agricultural sectors. The purposive sampling ensured coverage of these sectors, selected for their significant economic roles in the state. This sample size balances feasibility with statistical reliability, allowing generalisations while accounting for practical constraints. The questionnaire covered business demographics, employment levels, financial performance, challenges, and market access.

Qualitative Data:

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 selected SME owners who participated in the survey to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perspectives. The interviews were semi-structured, providing flexibility to explore specific themes more extensively, including the business environment, market access issues, and financial constraints.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the collected data was carried out using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods:

Quantitative Analysis:

Quantitative survey data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics, including the mean, median, and frequency distributions, summarised the data. Inferential statistical tests (e.g., chi-square tests and correlation analysis) were also employed to examine relationships and test hypotheses about the economic impact of SMEs.

Qualitative Analysis:

The qualitative interview data underwent thematic analysis. This process involved coding the transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of SMEs' economic contributions and the challenges they face.

RESULTS

Economic Contributions of SMEs: Employment Generation

The survey findings revealed that SMEs in Osun State are vital for employment generation, accounting for around 60 per cent of the local workforce. The survey results are summarised in Table 1 and discussed below:

Table 1. Employment Distribution Across Sectors

Sector	Employment (%)	Contribution to GDP (%)
Manufacturing	25	10
Services	35	15
Agriculture	40	5

Source: Authors Computation 2024

The table shows employment distribution across sectors, with agriculture accounting for the largest share (40 per cent), followed by services (35 per cent) and manufacturing (25 per cent). This employment mix indicates that SMEs contribute to a balanced economy, reducing reliance on any single sector.

Youth Employment

The survey highlighted that a significant number of SME employees are young. This demographic trend helps reduce youth unemployment in Osun State, which is essential given the country's high youth unemployment rate. The survey found that 65 per cent of SME employees are between the ages of 18 and 35, indicating that SMEs play a crucial role in integrating young people into the labour market.

Contribution to GDP

The results show that SMEs contribute approximately 30per cent to Osun State's GDP, underlining their economic significance. Their contributions span different sectors, with services making the highest contribution to the state's GDP (15 per cent), followed by manufacturing (10 per cent) and agriculture (5 per cent), as shown in Table 1. Despite these challenges, SMEs have sustained their role in the state's economic framework.

Challenges Faced by SMEs

Access to Finance

One of the most significant challenges faced by SMEs in Osun State is limited access to finance, with about 70per cent of respondents identifying this as a major barrier. The survey findings indicated two primary factors contributing to this challenge.

Stringent Lending Criteria

Traditional banks often impose strict lending requirements, including high collateral demands and rigid documentation procedures, making it difficult for SMEs to qualify for loans.

High-Interest Rates

Borrowing is expensive, with interest rates ranging from 15 per cent to 25 per cent annually, further discouraging SMEs from accessing financial services for expansion or operational needs. As shown in Table 2, only 30 per cent of SMEs reported having access to formal financial institutions for loans, highlighting the extent of the problem.

Table 2. Access to Finance Among SMEs

Financial Access Level	**Percentage of SMEs (%)**
Formal Financial Access	30
Informal Financial Access	45
No Financial Access	25

Source: Authors Computation 2024

Regulatory Hurdles

Regulatory barriers were a significant challenge for 55 per cent of SME owners. These hurdles include complex tax systems, multiple licences, and bureaucratic procedures, which can be time-consuming and costly. Qualitative interviews revealed that many SMEs struggle to navigate the regulatory landscape because they lack the resources or expertise to meet government requirements.

Market Access

The survey also highlighted limited market access, with 50 per cent of respondents citing competition from larger firms and a lack of marketing resources as key barriers. Many SMEs are confined to local markets, limiting their growth potential and profitability. As shown in Table 3, only a small proportion of SMEs reported substantial access to national or international markets.

Table 3. Market Access Levels for SMEs

Market Level	Percentage of SMEs (%)
Local Market Access	70
National Market Access	20
International Market Access	10

Source: Authors Computation 2024

COMMON FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thematic Analysis from Qualitative Data

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data indicated that inadequate market access significantly hampers SME growth potential; the themes are discussed below:

i. *Access to Finance*: Limited access to affordable credit, stringent collateral requirements, and high-interest rates were frequently mentioned as significant barriers to SME growth. It is recommended that government and financial institutions create tailored financial products for SMEs, such as low-interest loans or credit guarantee schemes.

ii. *Regulatory Environment*: Excessive taxation and complex regulatory procedures adversely affect SME operations. Policy reforms to streamline regulations and reduce tax burdens could improve the business environment.

iii. *Market Access*: Restricted access to larger markets and inadequate marketing strategies hinder business expansion. Leveraging digital platforms and e-commerce solutions is recommended to increase market reach.

iv. *Infrastructure*: Poor infrastructure, especially unreliable electricity and inadequate road networks, affects business productivity. Investing in infrastructural development would boost SME performance.

v. *Human Capital Development*: Continuous training and skill development are essential to improve SME productivity and operational efficiency.

vi. *Technology Adoption*: Use of digital tools strongly correlates with SME growth. Supporting digital literacy programmes and technology adoption can enhance business outcomes.

vii. *R&D and Innovation*: Limited funding for research and development constrains SMEs' innovative potential. Providing incentives and grants for R&D investments would encourage innovation.

viii. *FDI and Financial Inclusion*: Encouraging foreign direct investment and expanding financial inclusion initiatives can significantly improve SMEs' access to capital and growth opportunities, particularly in rural areas.

This shows that although SMEs play a significant role in Nigeria's economic development, several persistent challenges hinder their growth. Addressing these barriers through targeted interventions could unlock the sector's full potential and contribute to sustainable economic growth.

Quantitative Analysis

Researchers expand beyond basic descriptive statistics by adding measures such as standard deviation and variance to better understand the distribution of responses. This analysis will examine relationships among factors such as the number of employees, access to finance, market access, and SME performance indicators (like revenue growth). Multiple linear regression will model the impact of key factors (access to finance, market access, and regulatory challenges) on SME contribution to GDP and employment generation. See Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Median	St. Dev	Variance	Minimum	Maximum
Number of Employees	15.2	12	8.5	72.3	5	45
Revenue Growth (last 3 years) (%)	8.7	7.5	4.3	18.5	2	20
Access to Finance (Score 1-5)	2.4	2	1.1	1.21	1	5

Market Access (Score 1-5)	2.8	3	1.3	1.69	1	5
Regulatory Challenges (Score 1-5)	3.4	3	1.2	1.44	1	5

Note: Scores for Access to Finance, Market Access, and Regulatory Challenges are based on a Likert scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high)
Source: Authors Computation 2024

Table 5: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Variables	Employees	Revenue Growth	Access to Finance	Market Access	Regulatory Challenges
Number of Employees	1	0.42	0.37	0.45	-0.32
Revenue Growth	0.42	1	0.55	0.40	-0.30
Access to Finance	0.37	0.55	1	0.60	-0.28
Market Access	0.45	0.40	0.60	1	-0.35
Regulatory Challenges	-0.32	-0.30	-0.28	-0.35	1

Source: Authors Computation

The correlation matrix shows a positive relationship between the number of employees, revenue growth, and factors such as access to finance and market access. However, regulatory challenges negatively correlate with these variables, suggesting that increased regulatory hurdles are associated with lower growth indicators. See 6.

Table 6: Regression Analysis Results

Predictor Variable	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-Value	Interpretation
Constant	12.3	2.1	5.86	0.000	Significant intercept
Access to Finance (Score)	1.45	0.42	3.45	0.002	Positive significant effect
Market Access (Score)	1.80	0.50	3.60	0.001	Positive significant effect
Regulatory Challenges (Score)	-0.95	0.38	-2.50	0.015	Negative significant effect
Number of Employees	0.20	0.05	4.00	0.000	Positive significant effect

Sources: Authors' Computation 2024 2024

Regression Model Equation

GDP Contribution=12.3 +1.45(Access to Finance) +1.80(Market Access) − 0.95 (Regulatory Challenges) +0.20 (Number of Employees)

The regression analysis indicates that Access to Finance and Market Access have positive and significant impacts on SMEs' GDP contribution, whereas Regulatory Challenges negatively affect it. The number of employees also positively impacts GDP contribution.

Recommendations Based on Statistical Analysis

Given the strong positive correlation between access to finance and revenue growth, policies that improve SMEs’ access to affordable credit can boost business performance.

The negative correlation between regulatory challenges and key performance indicators indicates the need for policy reforms to simplify the regulatory environment.

Initiatives to expand market access, such as e-commerce platforms or trade partnerships, would significantly enhance SMEs' economic contributions.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that SMEs are integral to Osun State's economy, particularly in employment generation and GDP contribution. SMEs in sectors such as agriculture, services, and manufacturing collectively employ about 60 per cent of the workforce, with agriculture alone accounting for 40 per cent of employment. This multi-sectoral involvement helps stabilise the local economy by diversifying income sources and reducing the risk associated with dependence on a single sector.

The findings show that SMEs contribute significantly to youth employment, which is crucial in a country where youth unemployment is a pressing concern. The high proportion of young employees in SMEs indicates that these businesses not only provide jobs but also help address social issues such as unemployment and poverty.

SMEs contribute substantially to Osun State's GDP (30 per cent), despite the financial and regulatory challenges they face. Their presence across multiple sectors contributes to a more resilient economic structure, as no single industry dominates the state's economy. The relatively higher GDP contribution from the services sector (15 per cent) suggests a shift towards a more service-oriented economy, which could offer opportunities for future growth.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the critical role of SMEs in Osun State's economy, demonstrating their significant contributions to employment and GDP. However, several challenges impede their growth, including limited access to finance, regulatory hurdles, and constrained market access. To unlock SMEs' full potential and drive sustainable economic development, supportive policies and financial assistance are essential. By investing in SMEs and addressing the challenges they face, Osun State can promote economic resilience and foster a more inclusive economy.

In conclusion, while SMEs have shown resilience in their contributions to the state's economic framework, targeted interventions are clearly needed to support their growth. The data presented, coupled with the policy recommendations provided, offer a pathway for enhancing the economic impact of SMEs, which could lead to a more robust and sustainable economic future for Osun State.

Implications for Policy

To enhance the growth and sustainability of SMEs in Osun State, several policy measures should be considered:

i. Improving Access to Finance: Establishing specialised funds or loan programmes for SMEs could ease the financial constraints these businesses face. Low-interest loans or government-backed guarantees could make borrowing more accessible and affordable.
ii. Regulatory Reforms: Simplifying regulatory requirements, including tax processes and licensing, can create a more conducive environment for SME growth. Streamlined processes would help SMEs allocate more resources to business expansion rather than to compliance costs.
iii. Market Access Programmes: Programmes designed to improve SMEs' market access, such as trade fairs, export promotion initiatives, and e-commerce platforms, could help businesses connect with larger markets. This would also foster competitiveness by exposing SMEs to national and international standards.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of existing government policies supporting SMEs. Additionally, research could explore how technology enhances SME operational efficiency, for example through digital marketing or financial management tools. Longitudinal studies may also provide insights into SMEs' long-term impact on economic development in Osun State.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Institutional Review Board of the Osun State Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Cooperative approved this study. All participants provided informed consent before taking part, confirming they understood the research purpose and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

DISCLAIMER

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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