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TECHNOLOGY INCUBATION CENTERS (TICS) AND SMES PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Technology Incubation Centers (TICs) have become critical tools in promoting entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) development, globally, especially in emerging economies. They are set of specialized centers offering programmes that augment and support the growth and development of business enterprises. This study explores the impact of Technology Incubation Centers (TICs) on the performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. A descriptive survey was used to select a total of 308 SMEs in Lagos, Abia, and Kano states, Nigeria that have used the TICs in these states within the years of 2017 and 2020 ensuring the selected enterprises have about five years of post-incubation existence. Research Advisor table was used to select a total 169 through a simple random sampling technique. A structured questionnaire was distributed electronically to elicit data from the respondents through their WhatsApp and E-mail addresses with the aid of the registries of the TICs in the selected states. The data collected from the respondents were all analyzed using multiple regression analysis, frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation while the hypothesis were tested at 0.05 level of significance using SPSS statistical tool. The study found that, incubators significantly and favorably affect SMEs' sales growth and that, TICs mentorship positively and significantly influenced the selected SMEs competitiveness in Nigeria. In view of this, Nigeria government through the TICs coordinating ministry, the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology should ensure more availability of latest and essential technological infrastructure at the TICs. TICs should engage in more robust mentoring activities that will aid the SMEs competitiveness and overall operation, thereby increasing their performance.

Keywords: Technology Incubation Centers, Infrastructure, Mentorship, Sales Growth. Competitiveness

1.0 Introduction

Technology Incubation Centers (TICs) also known as tech incubators or accelerators have become critical tools in promoting entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) development, globally, especially in emerging economies. They are set of specialized centers offering programmes that augment and support the growth and development of business enterprises. In Nigeria, TICs serve as platforms that provide access to infrastructure, business advisory services, technology transfer, and mentorship, supporting entrepreneurs during the early stages of business growth. This aligns with global trends where business incubation has emerged as a strategic approach to addressing unemployment and stimulating

innovation-led growth (Adegbite & Bello, 2022; Oladimeji, Yusuf & Lawal, 2021).

The centers provide physical space equipped with necessary infrastructure, facilities, programmes and atmosphere that can protect the enterprise from certain business environmental hazards by creating a friendly atmosphere that will nurture the enterprises to certain level of maturity at a particular period of time till they can stand firmly and compete advantageously in the complex competitive world of business. TICs are particularly vital in Nigeria's economic landscape, given the challenges confronting SMEs such as inadequate access to funding, limited managerial expertise, and poor infrastructure. As noted by Uzochukwu & Ibrahim (2023), TICs mitigate these constraints by offering a conducive environment for enterprise development and collaboration. The Nigerian government, through the National Board for Technology Incubation (NBTI), has established numerous TICs across the country since the 1990s. Recent expansion efforts have seen the inclusion of innovation hubs in various regions, aimed at fostering regional technological capacity and entrepreneurship (Adebayo &Ibrahim, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the presence of TICs across Nigeria, their performance remains suboptimal. Many SMEs continue to face growth stagnation, poor sales and profitability, and high failure rates. These challenges are largely attributed to inadequate innovation practices, weak institutional support, mentorship and inconsistent policy implementation (Emeka, Akinyemi & Obinna, 2021). Moreover, TICs have been criticized for lacking the necessary technical expertise and modern infrastructure required to drive SME competitiveness (Ogundele & Mohammed, 2022). It is against this backdrop that the study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of TICs in enhancing SMEs performance in Nigeria, using sales growth and competitiveness.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the effect of Technology Incubation Centre's (TIC's) support on SMEs Performance in Nigeria. Specifically, to:

i. Assess the impact of TICs infrastructure on the sales growth of selected SMEs in Nigeria.

ii. Examine the effect of TIC's mentorship on the competitiveness of selected SMEs in Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

Ho1: TICs' infrastructure has no significant impact on sales growth of selected SMEs in Nigeria

Ho2: TICs' mentorship has no significant impact on the competitiveness of selected SMEs in Nigeria.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on SMEs that have graduated from Technology Incubation Centers in three Nigerian states: Lagos, Abia and Kano within the years of 2017 and 2020, these enterprises had five years of post-covid-19 existence after their incubation period which is expected to have made certain influence in their performance. These states represented diverse economic and geographical settings. Lagos represent Southwest region of the country. A commercial hub and the largest economy in Africa with one of the oldest and most active TICs, providing insight into incubation in a highly urbanized context. Abia State represents the Southeastern region of Nigeria, known for its large informal manufacturing and entrepreneurial clusters. While Kano, represent North-west, known for industrial development efforts and

government-supported SMEs initiatives, reflecting incubation performance in Northern Nigeria. These states provide a balanced representation of Nigeria's geopolitical zones, economic strength and incubation experiences. **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study are expected to inform policy decisions at both federal and state levels on the current state of the Technology Incubation Centers and provide a guiding clue on how to strengthen them and as a strategy for SMEs development. By assessing the effectiveness of TICs, this research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable entrepreneurship and inclusive economic growth. It also supports the core mandate of National Board for Technology Incubation (NBTI) to facilitate job creation, innovation, and enterprise development through structured incubation programmes (Chinedu & Hassan, 2022).

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Technology Incubation Centers (TICs)

The word, technology has its etymology from Greek words; "techne", "an art, craft" while "logos" mean "the word" combined to "technologia," and translated to technology, a systematic treatment of an art or craft. Incubation on the other hand is a Latin word "incubare," which means to lie down upon, a reference to the way birds sit on their eggs to keep them warm and safe. A place or program that provides business warm and safe atmosphere that nurture businesses the way birds nurture its egg could be regarded as technology incubation. Places furnished with necessary amenities and designed for this purpose are technology or business incubation centers.

The primary purpose of a business incubator is to stimulate the development of new businesses in the surrounding area. By assisting the local entrepreneur in establishing a business in the community, the surrounding area is likely to benefit from an increase in the number of available positions and the additional revenue generated by the new business activities (Sanusi and Akinnifesi, 2023). The majority of the enterprises that technology incubators support are startups and spin-offs. They maintain tight relationships with universities, research institutions, and technical parks (Lalkaka, 2015).

TICs have emerged as strategic platforms for fostering entrepreneurial development and SME performance, particularly in developing economies. These centers serve as structured environments that provide start-ups with access to essential resources such as workspace, mentorship, funding, business development services, and networking opportunities (Ogunleye & Adewale, 2021). Most incubators give their clients with office space and shared administrative services, the core of a genuine business incubation programme is the services it offers to start-up businesses (Tengeh & Choto, 2015). Simply put, the core objective of TICs is to support the early stages of business growth, reduce startup mortality rates, and enhance the competitiveness and ultimately the profitability of SMEs.

In Nigeria, TICs operate under the supervision of the National Board for Technology Incubation (NBTI), aiming to bridge the gap between innovation and commercialization. Scholars have emphasized that incubation centers serve as engines for knowledge transfer and innovation diffusion, especially in technology-driven enterprises (Okeke, Musa & Ibrahim, 2022). However, the effectiveness of these centers in achieving their goals depends significantly on the

quality of support services, institutional frameworks, and the socio-economic context in which they operate (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2023).

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

According to Mustapha & Jamiu, (2022), business organizations are commonly categorized into four (4) classifications namely, micro/cottage, small, medium and large business enterprises, all together popularly referred as MSMEs and no doubt long been playing a vital role in poverty alleviation, job creation and economic development. In developing countries, MSMEs constitute largest percentage of businesses, representing a major portion of gross domestic product (GDP) and categorizations were often based on certain factors which includes but not limited to size, workforce, and capital strength.

The definitions of SME are usually derived in each country, based on the role of SME in the economy, policies and programmes designed by particular agencies or institutions empowered to develop SME (Sanusi *et al*, 2023). In a large country like Nigeria, the contention is that the definition should vary from zone to zone because of inequality in natural resources distribution, economic activity and poverty level (Ofoegbu, Akanbi & Joseph, 2013).

TICs and SMEs' Performance

According to Taiwo & Esomu (2022), SMEs are typically confronted with performance challenges, the events of changing economic realities, marked by dramatic changes in policy and fierce competition, have caused many struggling with performance issues to go underground. However, customer satisfaction, retention and growth, revenue growth, product demand, market share and competitive advantage among others are performance indices usually used, they all directly or indirectly revolve around its financial prosperity.

Business performance is closely knotted to commercial efficiency which is determined by the ability of a company to implement optimal organization through offering of goods or services that continually meets the needs and expectation of customers. A business performance is defined as the outputs or meaningful business results measured against its intended outputs (Anekwe & Nwokediba, 2019). Though business performance is measured in many ways using various indices, hence, business is for profit making, the common mean is through finance.

Classical incubators are business incubators that provide assistance in launching a business through the provision of counsel, office space, and administrative infrastructure and other services (Buys & Mbewana, 2015). The manner in which incubators provide their support and services, their organizational structure, the scope and duration, the types of enterprise and businesses they serve differ. Even SMEs that used to experience top-notch performance are now in dire need of a strategy to solve their performance problems. It is based on these that technological incubation centers are established to help SMEs grow and survive. Technically, sales growth through access to infrastructure and machinery that aid productivity and output, profitability and competitive advantage are among the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) of business success that the TICs geared towards improvement for the SMEs.

Theoretical Review

Cognitive Model of Opportunity Recognition

Cognitive Model of Opportunity Recognition also known as K-model was

proposed by Kirzner (1973) in his seminal work, "On the Search for and Discovery Entrepreneurial Opportunities". The model describes the process of opportunity recognition as a cognitive process that involves three stages: preparation, recognition, and evaluation. Entrepreneurial opportunities emerge from exogenous changes in the environment such as technological advancements, shifts in consumer preferences, or regulatory reforms. These changes disrupt market equilibrium and create gaps that alert entrepreneurs can explore (Shane, 2003). The theory underscores the role of external stimuli in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, suggesting that the performance of incubated firms can be enhanced by timely identification and exploitation of such environmental opportunities.

The Conscious Competency Model

The Conscious Competency Model was conceptualized by Noel Burch in the 1970, and further developed in educational psychology. The model elucidates a framework for understanding the stages of learning and how individuals progress from awareness to mastery. From the "Unconscious Incompetence" where learner is unaware of their lack of knowledge or skill in a particular area, they don't know what they don't know, to "Conscious Incompetence" where the learner becomes aware of their lack of knowledge or skill and begins to understand what they need to learn, stage of consciously incompetent, then will lead to "Conscious Competence" where the learner starts to master the skill or knowledge, but it requires a great deal of conscious effort to perform it. Then to the final stage of "Unconscious Competence" where the learner has mastered the skill or knowledge to the point where they can perform it effortlessly and without conscious thought, it has become part of their routine.

This model is highly relevant to incubation contexts where entrepreneurs develop managerial, technical, and strategic skills through guided learning and experience. The four stages of unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence and unconscious competence represent the transformation process that incubates undergo as they build business acumen. This framework is useful in evaluating how TICs contribute to human capital development and the entrepreneurial capabilities necessary for SME success (Bello & Aluko, 2023).

Empirical Review

Taiwo & Esomu (2022) conducted a study on The role of technology incubation centers for small and medium enterprises in Nigeria in Lagos and Abia State. It found that, access to finance and collaborating with one another makes SMEs profitable and competitive and that, there were shortcomings in the incubation centers in the areas of access to finance and encouraging collaboration among incubatees. Hence, technology incubation centers affect the profitability and competitiveness of Small and Medium Enterprises in Nigeria.

In his study on Correlate of business incubators and small medium and micro-enterprises development (SMMEs) in Nigeria with the aim to assess the significant relationship between business incubators and SMMEs and also to determine the significant relationship between entrepreneurs' views and business incubation. Popoola, Ojo & Akintunde (2024) found that there is a significant relationship between business incubators and SMMEs success. That, business incubation has benefited startup ventures and has reduced the fear of failure of

business. Also, that, business incubation increases the numbers of startup ventures.

Clow (2020) conducted a study on The role of incubators in the internationalization process of incubated SMEs: a perspective of international cooperation. The objective was to understand the role of incubators, involved in international cooperation networks, in the process of internationalization of incubated SMEs using exploratory research. It found that, the objectives of these incubators are the development of local entrepreneurship through innovative projects, differentiating between them, by the positive impact, linked to socio-environmental criteria. All the incubators studied reinforce entrepreneurial behaviour and create an environment of innovation and internationalization for their incubated SMEs.

In a study by Aladejebi & Oladimeji, (2020) on Appraisal of technology incubation centers in south-west Nigeria with the aim of examining how well TICs in southwest Nigeria was doing in relation to the centers' objectives. It found that TICs have only done well in terms of giving businesses a place to work, making sure they are safe, and making sure they can have the needed money for investment, and resources to drive the expansion of the enterprise.

Abubakar-Sadeeq, Othman, Audu, Ramalan, & Abdullahi, I. (2021) conducted a study on the Impact of the technology incubation program on entrepreneurship promotion in Nigeria economy Their study finds, that TICs ran a variety of programmes and projects to help entrepreneurs grow and develop and improve the economy and society. Technology Incubators contribute to the development and growth of entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Most entrepreneurs make use of the services of technology incubator centers. Sanusi *et al*, (2023) conducted a study on Business incubators and entrepreneurial success: a study of small business enterprises in Lagos state, with the aim of examining the impact of business incubator on entrepreneurial success. The study finds that; business incubators improve entrepreneurial circumstances. There is no correlation between technology business incubators and entrepreneurial success and that, there is no correlation between physical and virtual incubators and entrepreneurial success.

Collectively, these empirical insights underscore the need for context-sensitive, outcome-driven evaluation frameworks that reflect the diversity and evolving objectives of technology incubation centers.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, a type of research that involves gathering of data from a predetermined group of people in order to get knowledge and insights about a variety of issue (Oyedokun, 2020), explains and test relationships between variables which allowed systematic collection of standardized data from a broad sample of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The study was conducted in Lagos, Abia, and Kano States, which represents southwest, southeast and the north regions of Nigeria respectively and selected based on their economic significance and regional diversity thus ensured geographic and economic representation, allowing the findings to reflect the diverse SMEs landscape in Nigeria. The target population comprised 308 SMEs that have used the TICs in the three selected states in Nigeria before the Covid-19 pandemic and have five years of post-incubation existence which make them suitable for the study, while the Research Advisor table was used to select a

total 169 using a simple random sampling technique.

A structured electronic questionnaire was used to elicit data from the respondents through their WhatsApp and E-mail addresses with the aid of the registries of the TICs in the selected states while the questionnaire's reliability was tested using ten samples, or 10% of the total sample size. There was a 0.79 Cronbach Alpha Level. The data collected from 169 respondents were all analyzed using multiple regression analysis, frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation while the hypothesis were tested at 0.05 level of significance using SPSS statistical tool.

Analysis and Findings

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents' Perceptions based on Variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviations
Infrastructure	169	2	5	3.61	.670
Mentorship	169	2	5	3.80	.619
Sales Growth	169	2	5	3.96	.596
Competitiveness	169	3	5	3.84	.782
Valid N (listwise)	169				

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 above, the range of infrastructure, mentorship, sales growth and competitiveness range from 2 to 5 points, with a mean of 3.61 and 3.96 and standard deviation of .670 and .596. respectively. By implication, the respondents averagely agreed with questions on infrastructure and Mentorship. Concerning SMEs performance, the range is from 2 and 3 to 5 points, with a mean of 3.96 and 3.84 and standard deviation of 0.596 and 0.782. indicating that, more than average of the respondents agreed with questions sales growth and competitiveness for smes performance.

Table 2 Linear Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.756[a]	.561	.597	.373	1.898

a. Predictors: (Constant), Infrastructure, Mentorship

b. Dependent Variable: Sales growth, Competitiveness.

Source: Author's Fieldwork Computation, 2025

Table 2 presents the model summary, shows that the correlation coefficient r is 0.756 (i.e. r = 0.756) which indicates that there exists a very strong relationship between SMEs Performance (dependent variable) and TICs' infrastructure and mentorship (independent variables). It is also clear from the table that the r^2 which is the coefficient of determination is 0.561 approximately 56%. This implies that more than 56% change in SMEs Performance can be explained by the TICs support.

Test of Hypotheses

Table 3: Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		

(Constant)	.304	.126		2.418	.016
Infrastructure	.173	.043	.156	4.034	.000
Mentorship	.154	.037	.154	4.173	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Sales growth, Competitiveness.

***Source*:** Author's Fieldwork Computation, 2025

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between TIC's infrastructure support and mentorship. The dependent variables in this model are sales growth (an increase in SMEs sales) and competitiveness (SMEs ability to compete in the market). The independent variables are infrastructure support (level of physical and technological resources provided by TICs) and mentorship (guidance and advise by experienced professionals). The model assesses how variations in independent variables predict changes in the dependent variables.

The coefficient of TICs Infrastructural Support (IS) of 0.173 suggests a moderate positive relationship between IS and SMEs Performance (Sales Growth), while the coefficient of Mentorship of 0.154 suggests a moderate relationship TICs Mentorship and SMEs competitiveness. Additionally, the probability and [t-statistics] value of .000 and [4.034], .000 and 4.173 further suggest that the relationship between Infrastructural Support and Mentorship over Sales Growth and Competitiveness are significant since alpha level of 0.05 is greater than the p-values in both sides. Consequently, the both null hypotheses that "TICs' infrastructure has no significant impact on sales growth of selected SMEs in Nigeria" and **"**TICs' mentorship has no significant impact on the competitiveness of selected SMEs in Nigeria" are thereby rejected.

Discussion on Findings

The findings of the multiple linear regression study on the impact of incubation centers on the sales growth of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Nigeria are displayed in Table 3, with the results showing that incubators significantly and favorably affect SMEs' sales growth. Although, this is against the report of the findings of Aladejebi *et al*, (2020) that TICs have only done well when it comes to giving businesses a place to work, making sure they are safe, and making sure they can have the needed money for investment, and resources to drive the expansion of the enterprise. It corroborates the findings of Popoola *et al*, (2024) that there is a significant relationship between business incubators and SMEs sales and success.

On Mentorship and Competitiveness, the study finds that, TICs mentorship positively and significantly influenced the selected SMEs competitiveness in Nigeria. This is in line with the findings of Taiwo & Esomu (2022), that, access to finance and collaboration with one another makes them profitable and competitive and that, TICs affect the profitability and competitiveness of SMEs in Nigeria. Also, Abubakar-Sadeeq *et al*, (2021), that TICs ran a variety of programmes and projects to help entrepreneurs grow, compete, as well as improving the economy and society.

Summary and Conclusion

The study sought to examine the effect of Technology Incubation Centre's (TIC's) infrastructure and mentorship supports on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. The SMEs that have used the TICs facilities in Lagos, Abia and Kano states, Nigeria within the years of 2017 and 2020, were selected. The study finds that, TICs infrastructural supports and Mentorship

among other programmes enhanced SMEs overall performance.

Infrastructure is very important for business; hence the required ones may be unaffordable for many businesses especially the SMEs, the TICs are set up usually by the government and equipped with different infrastructure to augment this and offer other SMEs centered support programmes including mentorship. Though, these Nigerian TICs have some technical glitches that hinder them from fully discharging their duties to the SMEs, their infrastructural support and mentorship is helping the SMEs to expand their sales, compete favorably and perform better in the market compared to others without TICs backings. Consequently, the study concluded that, Technology Incubation Centers have positive influence on Small and Medium Enterprises' performance in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Infrastructure plays a vital role in business productivity and sales growth, and TICs are set up with these facilities to support SMEs. Nigerian government through the TICs coordinating ministry, the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology should ensure more availability of latest and essential technological infrastructure at the TICs. SMEs owners should also tap in the available infrastructure at TICs, so their enterprise will enjoy the incubation experience and enhance their performance.

Mentoring is among the core functions of incubation, TICs should engage in more robust mentoring activities that will aid the SMEs competitiveness and overall operation, thereby increasing their performance generally.

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