
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND INNOVATION OF SMALL AND MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between strategic partnership and innovation of small and medium scale enterprises in Rivers State. Descriptive research design research design was used for the study. A total of one hundred and seventy-nine (179) laundry and dry-cleaning service owners, managers and supervisors, constituted the sample elements. Three hypotheses were tested using Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The results from the test of hypotheses revealed that there is a significant relationship between strategic partnership and innovation of small and medium scale enterprises in Rivers State. Consequently, it was concluded strategic partnership improves innovation of small and medium scale enterprises. In line with this, it is recommended that the management of small and medium scale enterprises should: actively seek and nurture strategic partnerships with complementary firms, research institutions, and industry associations., and customer segments, fostering a culture of innovation within the organization; prioritize human capital development by equipping employees with the skills, knowledge, and capabilities necessary to engage effectively in collaborative efforts and innovation activities; and proactively monitor market trends and customer preferences, adapting strategies accordingly to stay competitive and innovative in the ever-evolving business landscape of Rivers State.

Keywords: Strategic Partnership, Innovation, Product Innovation, Process Innovation, Market Innovation

Introduction

Small and medium-scale companies (SMEs) are considered to be a significant catalyst for fostering economic growth and development. According to Maksimov et al. (2017), they play a crucial role in facilitating economic growth by generating employment opportunities and fostering economic well-being within a given area. Small enterprises are seen by governments in both emerging and established nations as a significant source of employment, innovation, and wealth generation (Mills & McCarthy, 2016). The presence of small businesses plays a crucial role in fostering the increase of productivity in the production and provision of goods and services. Additionally, small businesses contribute to job creation, particularly in the service sector, at a relatively lower financial burden. A significant proportion of employment opportunities in developing nations are generated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which also have a prominent position within the private sector of these economies (Kumar, 2017; Lorenz & Pommet, 2018). The alleviation of poverty and the generation of wealth in underprivileged areas cannot just depend on multinational corporations or the central government as the sole providers of answers. However, individuals are need to rely on their entrepreneurial skills in order to generate innovative ideas, devise strategic plans, and effectively implement them, therefore utilising small enterprises as a means to generate wealth and alleviate poverty (Easterly & Reshef, 2014).

According to Sulistyono and Siyamtinah (2016), the implementation of innovation inside organisations has the potential to drive sales growth and enhance overall organisational performance by means of developing new products. The centrality of innovation to achieving competitive advantage in emerging economies worldwide is of utmost importance. It serves as a significant catalyst for the advancement of technology and industrial development. According to Amiolemen et al. (2013), the presence of innovation holds the capacity to stimulate the expansion of individual firms on a micro level, as well as the overall industries and economies on a macro one. Various measurements of innovation include radical innovation, incremental innovation, technical innovation, marketing innovation, product innovation, organisational innovation, and process innovation. In the context of this study, the metrics employed encompassed product innovation, process innovation, and marketing innovation.

The objective of product innovation is to enhance the quality, design, and structure of a product in order to fulfil the demands of customers (Severo & De Guimarães, 2022). According to Owino (2018), engaging in product innovation endeavours can lead to the development of improved goods or services, potentially resulting in an increased market share and hence yielding higher profits for the invested capital. Process innovation serves as a fundamental driver of competitive advantage for organisations. According to Milewski et al. (2015), the ability to adapt to a changing business environment is a crucial factor in ensuring the long-term sustainability of a company. Furthermore, it is worth noting that process innovation has been found to generate cost efficiency (Lampe, 2017) by decreasing the operating expenses of the organisation (Trantopoulos et al., 2017). One further outcome resulting from process innovation is the generation of novel knowledge (Ashok et al., 2016), which in turn enables enterprises to seek patent protection (IP) for their process innovations, so gaining a competitive edge over rivals (Hall et al., 2014). The implementation of a marketing strategy is vital for any corporate entity, as it enables them to effectively compete in the global market by ensuring the availability and optimal utilisation of resources (Morgan et al., 2018). The primary objectives of marketing innovation in company are addressing market demands, expanding market presence, and enhancing shareholder value (King, 2018).

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the various factors that have an impact on an organization's innovation capability. These factors include entrepreneurship, marketing capability, relational capital (Sulistyo & Siyamtinah, 2016), knowledge sharing (Lin, 2007), psychological empowerment (Ertürk, 2012), relationship management (Panayides, 2006), intellectual capital (Wu & Sivalogathan, 2013), innovation network (Sáenz & Bouvier, 2011), organisational knowledge assets (Delgado-verde, Martí & Navas-lo, 2011), customer relationship management (Lin et al., 2010), organisational culture and empowerment (Cakar & Ertürk, 2010), and informal social interaction (Liu et al., 2015). The examination of many aspects revealed a substantial impact on the enhancement of innovative capabilities. Our focus, however, is in examining the potential of strategic partnerships to increase their inventive capabilities.

Strategic partnerships encompass various forms of inter-firm collaboration, such as joint efforts in research and development, cooperative marketing initiatives, co-production arrangements, subcontracting agreements, networking organisations, and collaborative ventures. Additionally, strategic partnerships may involve the convergence of firms operating in related industries or sectors, pooling their collective strengths to achieve a competitive edge (Culpan, 2014). Strategic alliances are seen as a viable approach for sustaining a competitive edge within the sector and ensuring ongoing productivity (Dze & Soldi, 2012).

Numerous studies have endeavoured to elucidate the concept of innovation and its potential causes. However, a noticeable scarcity of research exists in the examination of the correlation between strategic partnerships and innovation, specifically within the context of small and medium-sized enterprises in Rivers State. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to address the aforementioned knowledge gap by investigating the correlation between strategic partnerships and innovation within the context of small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) in Rivers State.

Hypotheses

In a bid to achieve the aim and objectives of the study, it is hypothesized that:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between strategic partnership and product innovation

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between strategic partnership and process innovation

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between strategic partnership and marketing innovation.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Russo and Cesarani (2017) propose that the resource-based perspective framework examines the strategic utilisation of partnerships as a means to effectively use existing resources and achieve optimal profitability, even in the face of present market conditions. The dynamic capability approach posits that in a constantly changing market, achieving profitability is contingent upon forming partnerships and utilising resources in a manner that maximises value in alignment with prevailing market circumstances and the most suitable resources available. A strategic partnership is a valuable tool that organisations may utilise to gain a competitive advantage. Its primary objective is to improve the performance of the organisation by leveraging the synergistic benefits that arise from the collaborative efforts of the partnering organisations.

Strategic Partnership

A strategic partnership refers to a form of collaborative alliance between entities, agencies, or business affiliates. Various sorts of agreements may be seen, including those established by word of mouth, contractual arrangements, equitable partnerships, and joint businesses. The primary objective of these partnerships is to achieve outcomes that are mutually advantageous. Strategic alliances encompass various forms of inter-firm collaboration, such as joint efforts in research and development, partnerships in marketing activities, co-production initiatives, subcontracting agreements, networking organisations, and collaborative ventures. Additionally, these alliances may involve firms from related industries or sectors joining forces to leverage their collective capabilities and achieve a competitive edge (Culpan, 2014).

Partnerships are established when a business possesses resources that are required by another firm to enhance its performance. In order to enhance their competitive edge, certain enterprises operating in the same market. Strategic alliances encompass a range of small company collaborations, including joint efforts in research and development, partnerships in marketing, co-production initiatives, subcontracting agreements, participation in networking organisations, and collaborative ventures (Culpan, 2014). Partnerships have recently emerged as a notable trend, when firms actively pursue chances to engage in collaborative endeavours with other businesses, with the shared objective of attaining certain joint goals.

In response to heightened global competition, companies establish strategic alliances as a means to enhance efficiency and expand their market presence. Organisations employ their combined resources to enhance the competitiveness of the activities and resources involved. The causes contributing to the formation of partnerships are many, as identified by Zamir et al. (2014). These factors mostly stem from either the current market conditions or improvements in technology, or sometimes a combination of both. Strategic alliances offer several advantages, such as the sharing of challenges, access to new markets, facilitation of globalisation, cost subsidisation, interest in company entry or exit, and the provision of a favourable legal environment that gives assistance, as opposed to merger circumstances. Mergers and acquisitions necessitate compliance with several legislative prerequisites, however strategic partnerships may not be subject to such stringent criteria, since the collaborative agreement can even be established verbally, although formalisation is recommended.

Innovation

Innovation refers to the generation of novel ideas aimed at improving the operational effectiveness of a company's processes (Owuor, 2018). Every entrepreneur have an inherent aspiration or strategic vision to expand their firm. Business entities, including its managerial personnel, stakeholders, and workforce, has a collective aspiration for organisational expansion and the preservation of a specific degree of stability. Nevertheless, in actuality, businesses are occasionally confronted with unpredictable circumstances, and during such periods, they are still required to expand. Prominent managers think that innovation is a significant determinant influencing corporate growth. According to Couto et al. (2016), the ability to innovate allows companies to establish a strong presence in the market and achieve growth, regardless of whether the market conditions are stable or volatile.

Innovation may be seen as the process of generating novel and unconventional ideas pertaining to goods and procedures, with the aim of fostering community development. Incorporating information into economic processes is a fundamental aspect of innovation. The process encompasses the use of creativity, understanding, and the application of up-to-

date information and technology, leading to enhanced productivity and improved economic performance. During periods of stability, innovation might be focused on enhancing the quality of goods or services. During periods of transience, innovation might be focused on the generation of novel commercial prospects. Nevertheless, the mere conceptualization of innovation does not render it beneficial to an organisation. The attainment of competitive advantage is contingent upon the actualization of a certain factor (Perumal & Wilson, 2017).

Product Innovation

Product innovation occurs when a company delivers a novel product or service into the marketplace (Carayannis et al., 2015). Product innovation refers to the process of creating and introducing new, redesigned, or significantly better goods or services into the market. The term "innovation" refers to the introduction of a new or substantially enhanced item or service, characterised by its unique features or intended applications. According to Crawford and Benedetto (2013), a novel product idea refers to a declaration of the expected characteristics of a product that would result in specific advantages compared to existing goods or solutions to issues. Belliveau et al. (2012) define a new product as a thing or service that is being marketed by a business for the first time. A firm can demonstrate product innovation through several means, such as the development of a novel product, enhancements to technical specifications and quality, or the integration of new components, materials, or desired features into an existing product. According to Cooper (2009), a product is considered new if its presence in the market spans a duration of five years or less. The process of product innovation frequently involves a degree of uncertainty, as companies strive to identify the optimal market, product, and pricing strategy.

Process Innovation

Process innovation refers to a form of process development that involves the enhancement of a company's production processes (Frishammar et al., 2013). It is characterised by the generation and implementation of novel concepts and methodologies inside manufacturing firms (Parida et al., 2016). This encompasses a variety of diverse actions, including the implementation of new equipment, adoption of novel managerial practises, and modifications to the manufacturing process (Reichstein & Salter, 2006). The implementation of a process innovation on a broader scale typically necessitates the incorporation of both organisational and technological modifications (Reichstein & Salter, 2006). In order to successfully accomplish such a task, Lager (2000) emphasises the significant value of employing a structured methodology.

Marketing Innovation

The use of marketing innovation has been demonstrated to be an effective technique during periods of crisis (Naidoo, 2010). Marketing innovation is a strategic mechanism that facilitates the establishment and maintenance of a competitive edge (Anning-Dorson et al., 2018). Market innovation refers to the implementation of a novel marketing approach that involves modifications in product attributes, pricing tactics, package design, and product positioning (Karlsson & Tavassoli, 2016; Hussain et al., 2020). The process may also be characterised as the generation of value via the utilisation of pertinent information and competencies to execute a concept for a novel marketing strategy or enhancements in an already established marketing strategy (Varadarajan, 2018).

According to Varadarajan (2018), marketing innovation encompasses many types of innovations, including distribution innovation, promotion innovation, and price innovation. The primary aim of marketing innovation is to enhance the company's ability to fulfil client requirements, reposition its product within the market, or explore untapped market segments

(Karlsson & Tavassoli, 2016; Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016; Widjojo et al., 2020). Previous research has demonstrated that the implementation of effective marketing innovation plays a crucial role in enabling organisations to acquire or maintain a competitive advantage (Line & Runyan, 2012; Scaglione et al., 2009). According to a research conducted by Falk (2013), there is empirical evidence suggesting that companies who prioritise marketing innovation during times of crisis demonstrate a greater likelihood of survival.

Methodology

This study employed the descriptive research design. The population of the study comprise of one hundred and seventy-nine (179) small businesses located within Ikwerre, Port Harcourt and Obio/Akpor Local Government Areas. A well-structured questionnaire was developed for the study. The questionnaire consisted of eighteen (18) statement items. It is divided into two sections. Section A comprised of four (4) items describing strategic partnership, and section B include fourteen (14) statement items on the measures of innovation – product, process and market innovation. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussion

Questionnaire Distribution and Collection Statistics

This subsection presents the statistics of distributed, retrieved, and valid items questionnaires shared to respondents.

Table 1: Total Questionnaire Distribution Statistics

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<i>Distributed Copies of Questionnaire</i>	179	100%
<i>Retrieved Copies of Questionnaire</i>	175	97.8%
<i>Invalid Copies of Questionnaire</i>	3	1.7%
<i>Valid Copies of Questionnaire</i>	172	98.3%

Source: Research Data, 2023

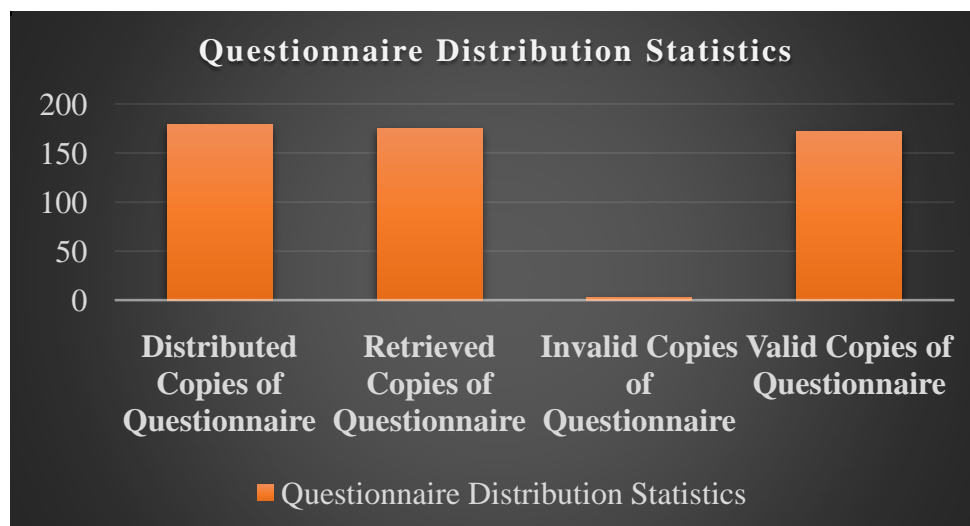


Figure 1 Distribution and Retrieval Frequency of Questionnaire

Source: Research Data, 2023

Table 1 and figure 1 illustrate that the author distributed a total of 179 copies of the questionnaire as predetermined in Chapter 3. Of these 179 copies distributed, only 175 copies, representing 97.8% of distributed copies of the questionnaire, were retrieved. Out of the 175 copies collected, 3 copies (1.7%) were observed to be invalid by the nature of responses, which were linked to duplicated options, omissions of key questions in the questionnaire. Only 172 copies (98.3%) of the questionnaire were observed to be properly filled and valid for subsequent usage in the study.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Strategic Partnership

Descriptive Statistics									
	Statement Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Agreement		
STP 1	Our company has formed joint ventures with other firms in order to expand our scope of reach and customer base.	172	1	5	2.80	1.037	Low		
STP 2	Our organization has been building alliances with other firms and institutions to increase product coverage.	172	1	5	2.84	1.034	Low		
STP 3	Our company has formed partnerships with other firms for cheaper resource outsourcing.	172	1	5	2.77	.969	Low		
STP 4	Our firm has reciprocal business agreements with key suppliers where a number of suppliers are also customers.	172	1	5	2.82	1.064	Low		
Valid N (listwise)		172							

Source: SPSS Output, 2023 (STP = Strategic Partnership Item)

From table 2, it can be seen that, in terms of strategic partnership dimension of transient advantage, respondents rank show high level of disagreement to all the statement items. This conclusion was arrived at as a result of all the mean values falling below the threshold (3.0).

Innovation

Innovation is operationalized using three measures; product innovation (measured on 5-items), process innovation (measured on 4-items) and marketing innovation (measured on 5-items).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Product Innovation

Descriptive Statistics							
	Statement Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Agreement
PDI 1	We provide our clients with services that offer unique benefits superior to those of competitors.	172	1	5	2.76	.936	Low
PDI 2	Our firm actively carries out its work on developing existing products and creating new products.	172	1	5	2.77	.907	Low
PDI 3	We enhance the range of our products and services with not previously released products and services.	172	1	5	2.76	.960	Low
PDI 4	We try to acquire new products by differing technical specifications and functionalities.	172	1	5	2.72	1.018	Low
PDI 5	Our company sees creating new products and services as critical tools to reach success.	172	1	5	2.78	1.012	Low
	Valid N (listwise)	172					

Source: SPSS Output, 2023

(PDI = Product Innovation)

From table 3 above, it can be seen that, in terms of the product innovation measure of Innovation, respondents showed a great level of disagreement to all the items.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Process Innovation

Descriptive Statistics						
Statement Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Agreement
PCI1 Our firm reduces the developing time of new products and services.	172	1	5	2.92	.939	Low
PCI2 Our company is flexible to provide products and services according to the demands of the customers.	172	1	5	2.77	.999	Low
PCI3 Our company develops in-house solutions to improve our manufacturing processes.	172	1	5	2.87	.909	Low
PCI4 Our company actively works to constantly adjust its business processes.	172	1	5	2.85	.943	Low
Valid N (listwise)	172					

Source: SPSS Output, 2023

(PCI = Process Innovation Item)

From table 4 above, it can be seen that, in terms of process innovation measure of Innovation, respondents express high levels of disagreement to all the statement items.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Marketing Innovation

Descriptive Statistics							
	Statement Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of Agreement
MTI1	It is important for our company to make changes in appearance, packaging, shape, and volume of our products.	172	1	5	2.67	.886	Low
MTI2	Our company constantly looks for new ways to deliver our products to our customers.	172	1	5	2.69	.887	Low
MTI3	We implement new marketing methods to promote our products.	172	1	5	2.70	.904	Low
MTI4	We make improvements in the manner of customer relationships to obtain customer satisfaction	172	1	5	2.74	.876	Low
MTI5	New ideas that come from customers and suppliers are evaluated continuously, and we try to include them into product development activities.	172	1	5	2.68	.803	Low
	Valid N (listwise)	172					

Source: SPSS Output, 2023 (MTI = Marketing Innovation Item)

From table 5 above, it can be seen that, in terms of marketing innovation measure of Innovation, respondents show high levels of disagreement to all the statement items. It is observed that all mean levels fall below 3.0, which is the threshold.

Evaluation of Structural Path Significance

SmartPLS 4 was used to perform measurement model studies, which involved clustering survey items based on their anticipated ability to measure a given construct. The questionnaire was designed to collect data on 18 observable factors from Rivers State's micro, small, and medium-sized businesses. There are four Latent variables (strategic partnership, product innovation, process innovation, and marketing innovation) that are conceptually connected to all 18 observable variables. The indicators stand in for the various factors that make up the latent variables. The survey data was used to build four construct measures.

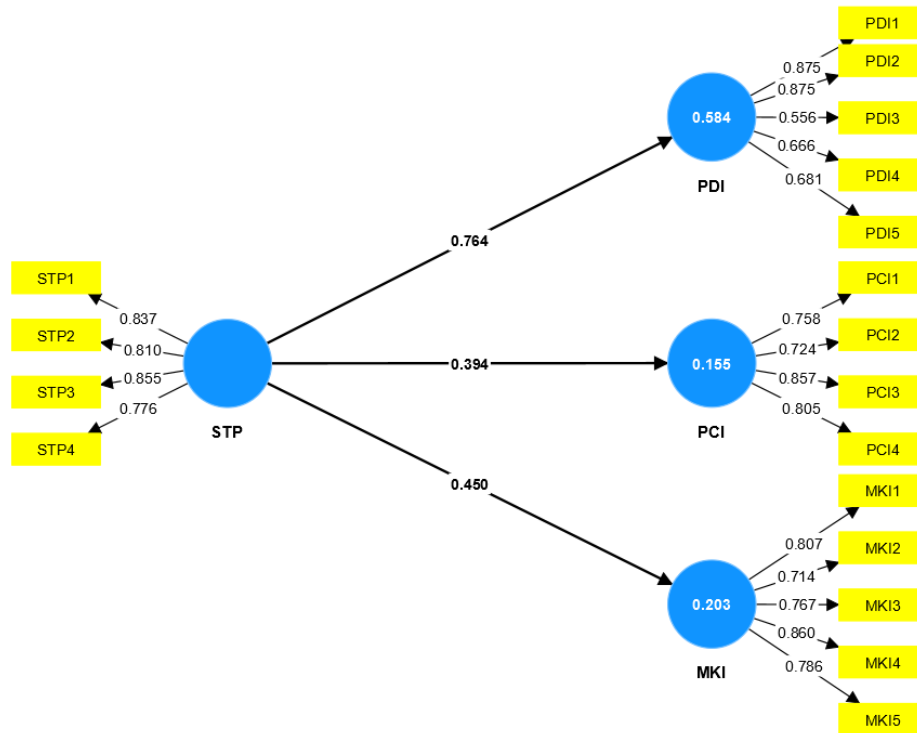


Figure 2: Output for Outer Loadings of Indicators

Source: SmartPLS 4 output on Research Data, 2023

Where:

STP - Strategic Partnership; PDI = Product Innovation; PCI = Process Innovation; and MKI = Marketing Innovation

Figure 2 shows that all the response items for all the constructs satisfied the threshold condition of 0.70, besides PDI3, 4 and 5.

Construct Reliability and Validity

Table 6: Construct Reliability (Convergent Validity)

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
STP	0.838	0.891	0.673
PDI	0.815	0.856	0.549
PCI	0.800	0.867	0.620
MKI	0.850	0.891	0.621

Based on the findings presented in Table 6, the latent constructs had favourable composite reliability values, with a range of 0.856 (Product Innovation) to 0.891 (Strategic Partnership). This indicates that the proportion of the overall composite variance, which functions as an estimate of the true-score variance for each construct, exceeds the threshold value of 0.70 as established by Hair et al. (2017).

Convergent Validity

The findings shown in Table 6 indicate that all variables possess average variance extracted (AVE) values that above the 0.50 criterion suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The product innovation latent variable has the lowest average variance extracted (AVE) value of 0.549, whilst the strategic partnership latent variable demonstrates the greatest AVE value of

0.673. Hence, it is both required and sufficient to deduce that the model exhibits indications of convergent validity.

Table 7: Overview of Discriminant Validity

	MKI	PCI	PDI	STP
MKI	0.788			
PCI	0.758	0.787		
PDI	0.617	0.627	0.741	
STP	0.450	0.394	0.764	0.820

From table 6 it can be seen that the diagonal values (square root of the AVEs) are above the 0.7 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Hence, it can be deduced that the model possesses both the necessary and sufficient evidence to establish its discriminant validity.

Test of Hypotheses

In order to test the bivariate hypotheses via the SEM, the bootstrap method was applied. Path coefficients (β values) of .10 to 0.29, .30 to .49 and .50 to 1.0 are weak, moderate and strong correlations, respectively. Also, for a two tailed test, t values greater than 1.96 are significant, while t values less than 1.96 are non-significant (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, hypotheses with p -values less than 0.05 level of significance were accepted, while those above 0.05 were rejected.

Table 8: Test of Hypotheses 1 – 3

	Path Coefficient (β)	Standard Deviation	T-Statistics	P-Values
STP -> PDI	0.764	0.036	21.151	0.000
STP -> PCI	0.394	0.106	3.715	0.000
STP -> MKI	0.450	0.099	4.545	0.000

The path relationship analysis presented in table 8 indicate that there are positive and significant paths between strategic partnership and product innovation ($\beta = 0.764$, $t = 21.151$, $p = 0.000$), and a moderate relationship between strategic partnership and process innovation ($\beta = 0.394$, $t = 3.715$, $p = 0.000$), and the relationship between strategic partnership and marketing innovation ($\beta = 0.450$, $t = 4.545$, $p = 0.000$). Therefore, H_{O1} , H_{O2} and H_{O3} were not supported.

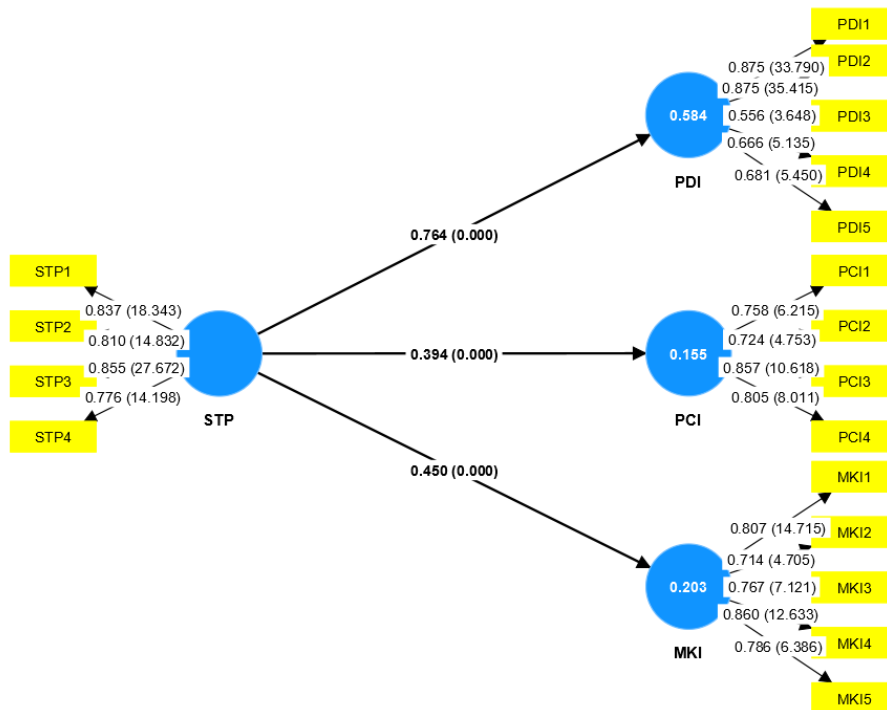


Figure 3: Structural Model

Source: SmartPLS 4 output on Research Data, 2023

Discussion of Finding

Strategic partnership and Product innovation

The outcome of the analysis on how Strategic partnership relates with Product innovation revealed that there is a substantial interrelationship between strategic partnership and product innovation, given the p-value of 0.000 which is less than the level of significance of 0.05 ($p=0.000 < 0.05$). The hypothesis which was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. The path coefficient (β) was 0.764. This indicates a strong positive relationship between strategic partnership and product innovation. The positive relationship implies that the product innovation increases when there is an increase in strategic partnership. In essence, when strategic partnership is low, such could hinder innovation in the form of product innovation. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (r^2) was 0.584. This denotes that a change in strategic partnership will account for up to 58.4% total variation in product innovation. This finding concurred with that of Liang and Liu (2020) that strategic partnership improvement can enhance logistics performance, innovation and economic growth.

Strategic partnership and Process innovation

The outcome of the eight hypothesis on how Strategic partnership relates with Process innovation showed that the p-value was 0.000 which was less than 0.05 level of significance ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). This connotes that strategic partnership relates significantly with process innovation. The null hypothesis in accordance with the decision role was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. When the strategic partnership is high, they will perform better in their various organisational tasks. The path coefficient (β) was 0.394. This is to say that strategic partnership has a moderate positive relationship with Process innovation. An increase in Strategic partnership will thus result in high increase in process innovation. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination between strategic partnership and process

innovation was 0.155. By implication, a change in strategic partnership will account for 15.5% total variation in process innovation. This finding agrees with that of Ahmodu et al. (2021) whose work showed that the quality of strategic partnership has a significant relationship with both ship turnaround time and average time spent at berth (service process) in the Nigerian ports.

Strategic partnership and Marketing innovation

The path coefficient (β) was 0.450. This shows a positive and moderate level of correlation among strategic partnership and marketing innovation. The positive link implies that the higher strategic partnership, the more the marketing innovation. In other words, reducing strategic partnership will subsequently reduce the marketing innovation. Similarly, the coefficient of determination (r^2) was 0.203. By implication, a change in strategic partnership will result in 20.3% variation in marketing innovation. This study is in line with that of Liang and Liu (2020) that strategic partnership can enhance market innovation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of the test of hypotheses and the discussion of the findings, it is concluded that strategic partnership improves the product, process and market innovation of small and medium scale enterprises in Rivers State. In line with this, it is recommended that the management of small and medium scale enterprises should:

- i. Actively seek and nurture strategic partnerships with complementary firms, research institutions, and industry associations. Collaborative efforts can facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and expertise, thereby enhancing the capacity of SMEs to innovate. Furthermore, strategic partnerships can provide access to new markets, technologies, and customer segments, fostering a culture of innovation within the organization.
- ii. Prioritize human capital development by equipping employees with the skills, knowledge, and capabilities necessary to engage effectively in collaborative efforts and innovation activities. Training programs, workshops, and continuous learning initiatives can empower employees to contribute meaningfully to innovation initiatives arising from strategic partnerships.
- iii. Proactively monitor market trends and customer preferences, adapting strategies accordingly to stay competitive and innovative in the ever-evolving business landscape of Rivers State.

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