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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the effect of networking skills on youth empowerment in Bauchi, Gombe and Yobe states in Northeast, Nigeria. An explanatory survey research design was adopted for this study. The population consisted of 1,694 indigenous youth from Bauchi, Gombe and Yobe states who participated in training at the skill upgrading and vocational training center from 2017-2021. A sample size of 322 was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table. Given the heterogeneity of the population for each state, Bowley's sample allocation formula was applied for the determination of proportionate sample size for each state while stratified and simple random sampling techniques were adopted for selecting the study participants. The quantitative data were collected through standardized questionnaire adapted from previous related studies and analysed through descriptive statistics and path analysis. All measurement items on the adapted questionnaire were carefully reworded then subjected to the criticisms of experts in the field for content and face validity. The construct reliability and internal consistency of the instrument was determined through Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Out of 322 copies of questionnaire administered, 305 representing 94.72 percent were returned. However, out of this number, only 289 copies of questionnaire representing 89.75% were correctly filled and thus suitable for data analysis. The results also showed that networking skills had a significant effect on youth empowerment ($\beta = 0.894, P > .001$) in selected states in the Northeast, Nigeria. The paper recommends that Northeast state governments of Bauchi, Gombe and Yobe and community leaders should properly expose trainees to market-driven opportunities and forums for adequate dialogue between youths and budding/successful entrepreneurs should be organized during training periods for building embedded relationships.

Keywords: *Networking skill, skill acquisition, Youth empowerment, Northeast, Nigeria*

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INTRODUCTION

Many problems, particularly for the youth, have made it difficult for many Nigerians to find meaningful employment, which has hampered the country's economic development. The desire for economic independence and self-reliance has also been severely hampered by the inadequate entrepreneurial climate around the world, which has led to rising rates of unemployment, vandalism, and other social vices among young people, particularly in developing countries (Adebayo, 2015). It is common knowledge that the youth constitutes the most productive component of a nation's population yet many youths in Northeast Nigeria are not meaningfully engaged in productive economic activities due to the dominant socio-economic environment in the region. The North-East, currently plagued by insurgent violence and terrorism, has a population of about 26m which is 12% of Nigerian total population (Ibe, 2020). Report indicates that 14.2% of youth in the zone could not secure job (NBS-FMYD, 2020). According to Kazeem (as cited in Mbah & Okeke, 2020), while poverty in Nigeria has remained alarmingly high at over 33%, over 60% of unemployed individuals are young people who have the potential to drive the growth of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) due to their creativity, energy, and determination.

Youth Entrepreneurship & Employment Support Services Programme (YESS) (2018) submits that the high unemployment rate among educated and uneducated youth and the ensuing financial hardship point to the need to increase the relevance of education and vocational training in order to better meet labour market requirements. Youths are a country's most significant and precious resource (Oyekan, 2015), whose creative capabilities and intrinsic abilities would boost their ability for entrepreneurship in order to promote SMEs as the engine of growth of the economy.

Nigeria is claimed to have a younger population than industrialized and/or other populated nations like the United States of America and China, which if correctly harnessed might result in socioeconomic

prosperity and sociopolitical stability for the sake of all. However, given the high rates of unemployment, young unrest, and other types of instability in the nation, it would appear that this is not the case. According to Obi (2022), Nigeria is the world's most vulnerable and failing state, the capital of poverty, with 50 million children out of school and 60 to 70 percent of them having never attended any formal education. Nigeria, one of the most tormented countries, has a high unemployment rate of 33%, which rises to 55% when you include underemployment, 60% of whom are young people in their prime earning years. In the second quarter of 2020, the youth unemployment rate (15-34 years old) was 35%. (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2021). Over 200 million people live in Nigeria, with about 39 million of them being children and young adults and 7.4% of the country's population lives in poverty (World Bank, 2021). The number of crimes and other social vices has increased as a result, including banditry, armed robbery, prostitution, abduction and hostage snatching for ransom, thuggery, the destruction of petroleum pipelines, advanced fee fraud, and computer fraud (Muhammed, Salihu & Alhassan, 2018; Ochonogor, 2010).

Entrepreneurial networking skills refer to the ability of young entrepreneurs to build and maintain relationships with key stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, partners, investors, and mentors. These skills are essential for young entrepreneurs to develop, as they can help them access resources, gain access to new markets, and receive valuable advice and support from experienced business leaders (Pache & Chowdhury, 2012).

Youth empowerment, on the other hand, refers to the process of giving young people the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to take control of their own lives and make positive changes in their communities. This can include providing education and training, as well as access to financial resources and mentorship.

Combining entrepreneurial networking skills with youth empowerment can have a significant impact on the success of young entrepreneurs. Networking can help young entrepreneurs to access resources and support, while youth empowerment programs can provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to start and grow their own businesses. Together, these two elements can help to create a supportive ecosystem for young entrepreneurs and increase their chances of success (Mtenga, 2013). When young people are provided with the right support and resources, they are more likely to become successful entrepreneurs. Networking and youth empowerment programs can play a key role in helping young people to overcome the barriers they face and achieve their entrepreneurial goals. The purpose of this study therefore is to examine the effect of networking skills on youth empowerment in Bauchi, Gombe and Yobe states in Northeast, Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

Ajzen's 1991 invention, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), predicts people's intentions to carry out particular acts. The purpose of the individual to engage in a particular activity is the primary component of TPB. According to Ajzen, this model is one of the most well-known and frequently used in applied social psychology for understanding and predicting human behavior (2011). According to the theory, a person's behavioral intentions are influenced by their attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The viewpoint here refers to a person's positive or negative judgement of the behavior in issue based on his thoughts and assessment of the effects of conduct. What is known as a subjective norm is a person's perception of whether prominent referents accept or disapprove of a particular behaviour, which is influenced by perceived pressure or the wants of significant individuals. Perceived behavioral control refers to one's

appraisal of how simple or complex an action is to carry out and how much control they feel they have over their surroundings. Perceived behavioral control is influenced by beliefs about the resources and barriers required to engage in the behavior. TPB contends that a person's attitude toward the behaviour, sense of control over the circumstance, and subjective norms can all be used to forecast their intent. According to the TPB, a person's propensity to engage in an activity rises as their desire to do so does. By demonstrating how much work people are prepared to put forth, how much effort they want to put forth, and how much effort they have already put forth, intentions are intended to capture the driving factor influencing a reaction. A conductor's chances of success generally rise with their amount of intention. Three factors, including attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control, affect the effectiveness of the purpose. However, it should be obvious that only when an activity is voluntary, or when a person has the choice between doing a task or not, can behavior be used.

However, Mayerl (2009) stressed that the model lacks enough theoretical and empirical backing and that the theory only has a narrow range of applicability. His claim is that participants' subjective accounts can only tangentially explain social variables such as subjective standards and perceived behavioral control. The majority's performance is impacted by motivating circumstances like the availability of necessary opportunities and resources, even though some behaviors may be relatively good at satisfying this requirement (for example, time, money, skills, the cooperation of others).

According to Mayerl and Ajzen (as described in Bisquolm, 2010), the idea's strength lies in its simplicity and clarity. However, it has been demonstrated that the concept may be used in a wide variety of research initiatives across several industries. Hansen and Jensen (2007) used TPB to investigate voting behavior and found that it can effectively explain a large portion of variation in

future voting intentions. Truong (2009) examined consumer adoption of online video and television services and came to similar conclusions. He found that acceptance is extremely well predicted by perceived behavioral control. In a recent study, Abioye (2020) examined the effects of entrepreneurship education programs on current graduate entrepreneurs in Nigeria and found that while the programs helped participants become more familiar with the idea of entrepreneurship, it was their passion and interest that led them down the entrepreneurial path. This is in line with the behavioral intentions and behavioral beliefs proposed by the theory of planned behavior.

Networking Skills

Entrepreneurial networking ability is a critical element of the entrepreneurial process (Kyndt & Baert, 2015). Through networking, small firms can engage in relationship marketing and gain access to more personal relationships with people from other industries, which can be a source of social capital (Grzegorzczak, 2019). In order to boost owner/managers' competitiveness and their ability to execute marketing strategies, business networking is crucial (Turyakira & Mbide, 2015). According to Nguyen (2020), networking—both formal and informal—is related to SME survival, but only formal networks are linked to growth. She also discovered that this correlation was statistically positive.

According to Cavallo, Ghezzi, and Rossi-Lamastra (2021), there is a ton of evidence that successful businesses were especially active networkers with regulators and other businesspeople. Additionally, Santoro, Bertoldi, Giachino, and Candelò (2020) found a link between the success of organizations and entrepreneurial networks. The three components that make up a business network are each sub-performer, the activity of the network, and the source. Individual networks, performance networks, and source networks will thus be included in business networks (Belso-Martnez, Tomás-Miquel, Expósito-Langa & Mateu-Garca, 2019).

Youth Empowerment

Youth are characterized according to a range of standards and traits in various countries. All young people in Nigeria between the ages of 18 and 35 are referred to as youths in the country's National Youth Policy (Uzoma, Bello, Falade & Dawon, 2016). According to Jega (as described in Lucas, Alaka, and Odozi, 2014), youth are a special set of people with a lot of stamina and a strong drive to achieve particular goals and objectives. Obi and Adjekophori (as described in Inyang and Agwadu, 2017) define empowerment as a collection of interventions, policies, and actions aimed at enhancing the capabilities of individuals and social groupings. It also entails fostering an atmosphere that enables individuals to reach their intellectual and productive potential. The National Planning Commission (NPC) (2004) defined empowerment as the process of giving the voice to the poor and disadvantaged groups by expanding their participation in decision-making and implementation.

Young people are renowned for possessing distinctive qualities that make them stand out from earlier generations. Change-seeking, enthusiasm, radicalism, revolt, curiosity, hard work, ego, and ambition are some of these characteristics. Young people should be involved in decisions that will affect them because, if their minds are focused in the right direction, they are the driving force behind societal advancement. The economy, society, and culture would develop, and young people would have the opportunity to feel self-fulfillment as a result (Ezeani, 2012). Empowerment for young people is achieved when they recognize their ability to make choices in life, understand the potential consequences of those choices, make informed decisions, take action on those decisions, and take responsibility for the resulting outcomes.

Youth empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses attitudes, structures, and culture. It empowers young people by giving them the ability to make decisions and have an impact on their own lives and the lives of those around them. This process of creating and

maintaining the necessary conditions that allow young people to act independently and in line with their own authority, rather than being directed by others, is what is referred to as youth empowerment. Enabling conditions for youth empowerment include a strong value system, access to knowledge, information, and skills, as well as a stable environment of equality, peace, and democracy. Additionally, they consist of political will, sufficient resource allocation, a strong economic and social foundation, and accommodating judicial and administrative frameworks (Sasaki, 2006).

Conceptualizing empowerment is essential for better understanding young empowerment. The term "empowerment" is used in a range of contexts and fields, including community development, psychology, education, economics, and research on social movement and organization, according to Das and Chatterjee (2020), and how it is interpreted differs depending on the viewpoint (Hofstetter et al., 2021). But the majority of literature links empowerment to having personal control over the resources that affect one's own lives and, more generally, to having more choice and power to shape one's own life (Cavalier, 2018; Schmietow & Marckmann, 2019).

According to Emejuru (cited in Okonkwo, Nwokike, & Nwafor, 2021), youth empowerment involves providing beneficial training and education, and can be broken down into three key steps: educating young people in life coping skills, teaching them entrepreneurial skills, and instilling in them a sense of self-sustainability. In order to empower the young people to make changes in their life and the lives of others, this requires changing their attitudes and belief systems. According to Brieger, Bãro, Criaco, and Terjesen (2021), youth empowerment is defined as involving young people and promoting ideals that allow them to contribute to the economic, social, and cultural growth of their families, nations, and themselves. When a person accepts that they have the power to choose in life and that those choices have an impact, they

become more empowered. They gain power when they willingly make an informed decision, follow through on it, and accept accountability for their deeds. The creation and upkeep of an atmosphere that promotes young people acting independently and within their own bounds constitutes the second step.

Empirical Studies

Gill, Aftab, Rehman, and Javaid evaluated youth empowerment and sustainable development in Pakistan in 2019 using data from the Prime Minister's Youth Program. The core data for this study came from 275 randomly chosen respondents from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who responded to an online, self-administered structured questionnaire. Multiple secondary sources were used to compile the data. The data were statistically and formally analyzed using one-way ANOVA, Pearson's correlation, and regression analysis with SPSS version 20. The report advocated giving young people's ideas precedence and ensuring their participation in policymaking at all levels. It came to the conclusion that young empowerment contributed to sustainable development.

A mixed method approach was used by Pettifor, Wamoyi, Balvanz, Gichane, and Maman (2019) to examine the success of entrepreneurs in SMEs in Australia and Malaysia. There were two studies done back to back. One study used interviews to elicit behaviors and identify context-specific entrepreneurial abilities from 20 and 10 entrepreneurs from Australia and Malaysia who owned and operated SME manufacturing and service businesses. The second study examined the perceived impact of entrepreneurial skills on business success in Malaysia and Australia using a sample of 391 SME entrepreneurs. Both the comprehensive and sparse models of entrepreneurial competences were used (179 Australians and 212 Malaysians). The study's findings demonstrated that entrepreneurial abilities were a trustworthy indicator of economic success in both nations. The constructions utilized in this

analysis, which also comprise the networking skills and opportunity spotting skills, are comparable to those utilized in the current study.

Research on the effects of networking on long-term entrepreneurship in Ghana was done by Neumeyer and Santos (2018). The sample for the study consisted of 320 female business owners from Ghana's Mfantseman district, and data was collected via questionnaires. The two stage multinomial logit and ordinary least square (OLS) estimate methodologies were used in the data analysis. The study's conclusions show that the women who run enterprises in the Mfantseman neighborhood belong to at least one of the following four networks: religious, professional, political, or ethnic. Launching business activities using information resources was advised in the report. These initiatives should frequently be strengthened by creating new links. It has been established that social capital, which is built through interactions, is both a prerequisite and a sufficient component for entrepreneurship success. The impact of young people's networking skills on empowerment is one of the study's main topics of focus.

The effects of market orientation, network capacity, and entrepreneurial orientation on the international performance of small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) in Mexico were examined by Alexandra, Angel, and Jess (2018). Data for a quantitative study was acquired via surveys and a standardized questionnaire with seven-point Likert assessments. 161 owners and/or managers of the 8887 SMEs registered with the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico were chosen as the study's population through the use of practical sampling. Electronic devices (tablets) were employed to facilitate data collection, and PLS-SEM statistical analysis, which is particularly successful for small samples, was used to evaluate the research hypotheses. The study discovers that international performance of SMEs is positively impacted by global entrepreneurial orientation and network readiness, but not by global market readiness. The study discovered relationships

among network capacity, market orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, and the success of international SMEs. This study, like the previous one, offers predictions regarding the empowerment of young people in the study area by taking networking abilities and entrepreneurial-oriented characteristics into consideration.

Nikoi (2016) studied how youth empowerment is viewed and experienced by youth in Nairobi, Kenya, based on a four-year longitudinal study of kids who took part in an informal, vocational training program. The results show the various ways that young people seek out, pursue, and actualize empowerment in their day-to-day activities. Additionally, they imply that young people's conceptions of empowerment are more nuanced than those promoted by initiatives to promote young people's empowerment through entrepreneurial or vocational training. The results of the study were used to support the development of a comprehensive model of youth empowerment. This model was built on the foundations of the empowerment process and the firsthand accounts of the youth. Razak, Ismail, and Abdullah (2015) looked at the significance of self-motivation in the relationship between the development of entrepreneurial skills and self-employment practice among Malaysian public university graduates. The societal, cultural, and economic circumstances in which young people live are represented by these dimensions, which cover goals as well as marketable skills and knowledge. Over a five-year period, from 2009 to 2014, the study used a cross-sectional survey method to collect data from graduates of three universities in three zones of the Malaysia Peninsular. Descriptive statistics and multiple regressions were used as data analysis techniques. The Malaysian government and community leaders were urged to adopt practical measures to promote and encourage more young people to pursue self-employment (for example, school counseling).

METHODOLOGY

Survey Procedures

Explanatory survey research design was adopted for this study. From a population of 1,694 beneficiaries from Bauchi, Gombe and Yobe states who underwent skill upgrading and vocational training from 2017 to 202, a sample of 322 was determined based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table. Stratified simple random sampling technique was employed in recruiting the study participants. Data for the study was collected using adapted structured questionnaire from previous related studies. From the 322 questionnaires administered, 305 were returned but only 289 were usable and used for the analysis. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Path Analysis. The construct reliability and internal consistency of the instrument was determined through Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Opportunity recognition competence had Cronbach's alpha of 0.72 and Alpha for youth empowerment was 0.684

Measures

The independent variable for this study was networking skills. Networking skills is part of the social capital required by an individual for engaging, building and sustaining enduring business and marketing relationships profitably. It was measured by four items that were adapted from the studies of Kurgat, Weru and Wata (2019). In the questionnaire, item one sought to evaluate whether respondents belong to many network business groupings. Item sought to assess whether respondents often get referrals of new customers from my network groupings. The third item sought to assess whether respondents consider networking avenues as a means of survival of my enterprise. The fourth and last item sought to assess whether respondents deliberately create new contacts and relationships.

The dependent variable, youth empowerment was defined by the Commonwealth Secretariat (as cited in Gill, Aftab, Rehman & Javaid, 2019) as creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which

young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others. It is proxied by starting a business and building wealth (Kutzhanova, Lyons & Lichtenstein, 2009); with two important caveats (business is built around an innovation with entrepreneur's goal of growth as focus (Schumpeter, 1934) under enabling environment that allow young people to act independently and under their own authority rather than at the whim of others (Sovacool & Brisbois, 2019). This includes supportive monitoring and administrative frameworks (Sasaki, 2006). Youth empowerment was measured by three items adapted from the studies of Martínez, Jiménez-Morales, Masó and Bernet (2016). In the questionnaire, item one sought to evaluate whether Government supply enough tools, machines and other materials needed by the beneficiaries to start off their own businesses (enabling conditions). Item two assessed whether respondents can take actions to create their business based on skill acquired and accept responsibility for their actions. The third item sought to assess whether the youth empowerment scheme provides monitoring, counseling and retraining to the beneficiaries.

Because both path analysis and regression are based on linear statistical models (Suhr, 2022), the following linear regression model was employed to achieve the study objective.

$$YE=f(NS)$$

$$YE=f(MNBN, OGRfN, NMES, DCNCnR)$$

$$YE= \beta_0+\beta_1MNBN, + \beta_2OGRfN + \beta_3NMES + \beta_4DCNCnR +\mu_t\text{.....(6)}$$

Where

YE= Youth Empowerment

β_0 = Constant term

μ_t = Error Term

MNBN-Many Network Business Groupings

OGRfN= Often Get Referrals from Networks

NMES = Networks Means of Enterprise Survival

DCNCnR= Deliberately Create New Contacts and Relationships

The Conceptual Model for this study is presented in Figure 1.

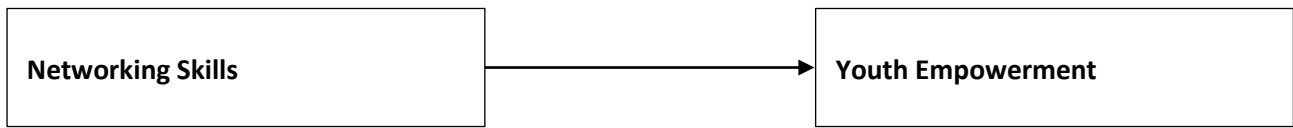


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Test of Hypotheses

H₀: Networking skill has no significant effect on youth empowerment in selected states in Northeast, Nigeria.

Objective: Examine the effect of Networking Skills on Youth Empowerment in selected states in Northeast, Nigeria.

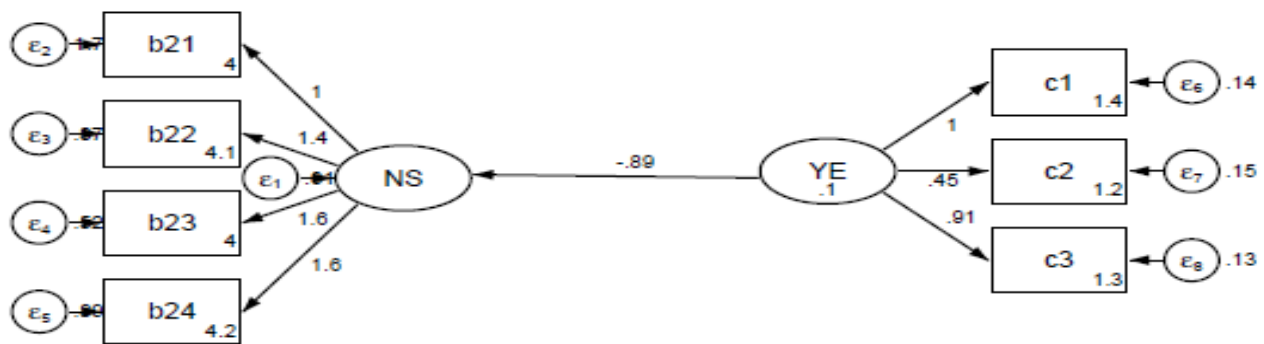


Figure 1. Structural equation model for networking skill and youth empowerment

Table 1: Standardized Estimates for Networking Skill and Youth Empowerment

		Coef.	Std. Err.	Z	P>z	[95%Conf.Interval]	
Structural	YE	-0.8942	.2557	-3.50	0.001	-1.3954	-.3928
Measurement	ALL						
B21	NS	1					
	_cons	4.0207	.0914	43.99	0.000	3.8416	4.1999
B22	NS	1.3700	.1518	9.02	0.000	1.0724	1.6676
	_cons	4.1418	.0866	47.80	0.000	3.9720	4.3117
B23	NS	.6279	.1779	9.15	0.000	1.2792	1.9767
	_cons	4.0311	.09041	44.59	0.000	3.8539	4.2083
B24	NS	1.6054	.1779	9.02	0.000	1.2566	1.954
	_cons	4.2352	.09626	44.00	0.000	4.0466	4.4239
C1	YE	1					
	_cons	1.4359	.0292	49.23	0.000	1.3788	1.4931
C2	YE	.45169	.11168	4.04	0.000	.2328	.6705
	_cons	1.2249	.0245	49.87	0.000	1.1767	1.2731
C3	YE	.90907	.1918	4.74	0.000	.5330	1.2851
	_cons	.3183	.02740	48.11	0.000	1.2646	1.3720

The initial structural equation model has 289 observations. There are seven observed variables with latent variable youth empowerment used as reference indicators and therefore fixed at 1.0 for the unstandardized solution.

In standardized solution, both the latent and the observed variables are rescaled automatically to have a variance of 1.0, which allows standardized estimates for each of the loadings for the measurement model. All seven of these are strong, 0.451 to 1.605. These results are included in figure 14 above. The tests showed that all the loadings are statistically significant. For the structural part of the model, the study observed that Networking Skills has a strong effect on youth empowerment $\beta = -0.894$, it has a significant effect with p-value of 0.001.

For the measurement part of the model, the study observed that all observed variables were having significant impacts on the youth empowerment, they were three observed variables, all were significant at 0.001, while all the four observed variables for the latent variable Networking Skills also made significant impacts at 0.001 as depicted in table 1.

Discussion of Finding

The findings showed that networking skill had a significant effect on youth empowerment in selected states in Northeast, Nigeria. This finding corroborates with Neumeyer and Santos (2018) who undertook a study on the role of networking on sustainable entrepreneurship and found that women entrepreneurs in the Mfantsiman district belong to at least one of the four networks identified as religious, occupational, political or ethnic. Entrepreneurship requires information resources to start business activities. While they hold some of these resources themselves, they often complement their resources by making other contacts. These contacts create social capital which serves as a necessary and sufficient condition for successful entrepreneurship.

Taneja and Toombs (2014) who found that firm performance in the modern business environment relies on how effective networking is done through which better processes and markets are identified and this creates a change for the business to survive tough economic conditions. Also, the finding is in consonance with Rekarti, Bahari, Zahari, Doktoralina and Ilias (2019) who researched on the entrepreneurial network of Muslim women entrepreneurs in the Southern Region of Malaysia to explore the dynamic roles of strong and weak ties during critical problems (tipping points), and how this affects the subsequent performance of the small business and the findings support the idea that the relationship with business networks (suppliers, customers and employees) is established at the start-up stage. However, connections with other individuals/parties of the business network (such as financial institutions, governments agencies, clubs and associations, and other entrepreneurs) are established at the developing phase of the business.

The finding also is in harmony with Orji, Kusi-Sarpong and Gupta (2020) who examined the relationship between social networking and business performance using selected entrepreneurs in Ota, Nigeria and found that network-based system can bring the success every entrepreneur craves in business. Owners of business should be involved in social networking which will enhance their business and the right social media should be used to get current information relevant for the business which will increase business success. The research concluded that social media networking has become a viable tool for business differentiation and success because the business world is becoming more competitive in the emerging global village.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that networking skill by the trainees positively influences youth empowerment in selected states in Northeast, Nigeria. Therefore, the study recommends that with regards to building networking skills, trainees should be exposed to

market-driven opportunities and forums for adequate dialogue with budding/successful entrepreneurs during training periods for building embedded relationships. Media literacy should be used by the supervising ministry featuring youth beneficiaries as ambassadors to stimulate entrepreneurial orientation of idle youths in the community.

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