

Innovations

Exploring the Effect of Public Relations Public on the Performance of SMEs in South East Nigeria

**Abugu, James Okechukwu¹; Okezie, Kristopher Onyekachi²;
Emmanuel Samuel Udo³**

¹Department of Marketing, University of Nigeria Enugu Campus

²Federal University of Allied Health Sciences, Enugu, Enugu State Nigeria

³Department of Banking and Finance, Akwa Ibom State University

Corresponding Author: **Emmanuel Samuel Udo**

Abstract: *This study explores the impact of public relations (PR) on the performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria, focusing on three core PR components: employee relations, community engagement, and media relations. Using regression analysis, this research examines how each PR aspect influences SME performance based on data from 368 SME stakeholders across three states. The results revealed that robust employee relations characterized by clear communication, regular staff meetings, and targeted training significantly enhance productivity. Community engagement efforts, including sponsorship programs, needs assessments, and the provision of basic amenities, foster local loyalty and improve business outcomes. Furthermore, strategic media relations through activities such as documentary production and social media advertising elevate brand visibility and customer confidence. Supported by human relations, stakeholders, and agenda-setting theories, our findings underscore the pivotal role of public relations in SME growth. Recommendations emphasize the need for transparent communication channels, employee development, community involvement, optimized media strategies, and sustainability practices. This study offers actionable insights for SMEs seeking to harness public relations as catalysts for performance improvement and long-term success.*

Keywords: *Public Relations, Small and Medium Enterprises, Innovation, Strategic Communication*

JEL Codes: M37; L25; M13; O31; O15; M31; D83

Introduction

In today's highly competitive business landscape, public relations (PR) has evolved from a promotional tool to a critical strategic enabler for organizations seeking growth and sustainability. Across both domestic and international markets, businesses, whether in manufacturing or service delivery, aim to secure market share and to position themselves as industry leaders. Public relations are integral to this endeavor as they build positive relationships, enhance organizational reputation, and provide a competitive advantage. Maamaa (2011) described PR as a management function that cultivates favorable relationships between an organization and its diverse public, while Orando and John (2014) highlighted PR's role as a tool designed to gain the support of both internal and external stakeholders.

Public relations support organizational success by eliminating friction, reducing suspicion, fostering goodwill, and ultimately establishing mutual understanding between organizations and their stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 2004). Nwaeze (2015) adds that PR involves monitoring, managing, and evaluating public perceptions of organizational policies and activities with the aim of earning public acceptance. This study examines three core PR components—employee relations, community engagement, and media relations—and their roles in enhancing the performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria. Effective employee relations, characterized by clear communication and training, enhance morale and productivity. Community relations, exemplified by sponsorships and local support, foster trust and loyalty, whereas media relations, including social media and documentary advertising, strengthen visibility and customer confidence. Each component is essential for SMEs aspiring to grow and establish a market presence.

Despite the acknowledged importance of PR, limited research exists on the specific impact of PR strategies on SMEs in South-East Nigeria. This study addresses this gap by investigating PR's influence on SME performance in the region, focusing on the unique challenges that SMEs face, such as limited resources and a dynamic local market. The theoretical framework incorporates human relations, stakeholders, and agenda-setting theories, each of which elucidates PR's role in building and managing crucial relationships for SME success. Human relations theory underscores the value of employee engagement, whereas stakeholder theory emphasizes the importance of addressing diverse interest groups. The agenda-setting theory, particularly relevant to media relations, highlights how PR can shape public perceptions and influence consumer behavior.

Globally, PR strategies vary according to region and culture. For example, SMEs in Europe often employ dynamic communication strategies that allow them to compete with larger enterprises (Koster & Stel, 2014; Winkler, 2016). These international perspectives underscore PR's universal relevance, while highlighting specific opportunities and constraints for SMEs in South-East Nigeria. In this study, PR is

consistently referred to as "public relations," using cohesive terminology to avoid potential confusion. This study ultimately aims to assess how targeted PR strategies contribute to the performance and growth of SMEs in South-East Nigeria, offering actionable insights for SME leaders, PR practitioners, and policymakers.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a critical role in national economic development by fostering job creation, innovation, and overall economic resilience. However, achieving optimal performance is essential for SMEs' long-term success. As a management function, PR serves as a strategic instrument to shape public perception, strengthen organizational reputation, and build supportive relationships. Broom and Tucker (2008) characterized PR management as a process that fosters positive behavior and mutual understanding among social groups essential to an organization's mission. Increasingly, innovative organizations engage external stakeholders to leverage internal capabilities and utilize available resources, both internal and external, to sustain growth (Minna, 2014).

Public relations encompass a range of internal and external stakeholders, from employees to community members, customers, and media. Like any business, SMEs encounter intense competition and face political, legal, and economic challenges. Public relations strategies are therefore adapted to the organization's operating environment, with internal PR campaigns boosting staff morale, enhancing communication, and motivating employees, whereas external PR initiatives strengthen community trust and drive organizational performance. Vercic et al. (2013) noted that, while PR's objectives of PR remain consistent across contexts, specific strategies and techniques must be tailored to each environment.

Despite these strategic benefits, Nigerian SMEs report high rates of poor performance and business failure. PR aims to foster cooperation and mutual understanding among stakeholders, which is essential for sustained growth. Nonetheless, external stakeholders' influence on an organization's performance can be substantial and their actions (or inactions) may critically impact organizational outcomes. This raises a key question: could the underperformance of some SMEs in South-East Nigeria be attributed, in part, to insufficient PR efforts and weak stakeholder relationships? This study seeks to answer this question by examining the effect of PR on the performance of selected SMEs in South-East Nigeria, ultimately providing insights into how strategic PR practices can enhance resilience and success among these businesses. The primary objective of this study is to explore the influence of public relations on the performance of selected SMEs in South-East Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To determine the relationship between employee relations and SME performance in South-East Nigeria.
2. To investigate the effect of community relations on SME performance.
3. To assess whether media relations significantly impact SME performance.

The geographical focus of this study includes three states: South-East Nigeria, Anambra, Ebonyi, and Enugu. This regional selection was motivated by the scarcity of similar studies in these areas. The selected SMEs include Juhel Pharmaceutical in Awka, Anambra State, Abakaliki M.U. Company in Ebonyi State, and Innoson Technical Industrial Company in Enugu State. These companies were chosen on the basis of their strategic roles in their respective states. The study examined four independent variables—employee relations, community relations, and media relations—while performance served as the dependent variable.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon three key theories to analyze the role of public relations (PR) in enhancing the performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in South-East Nigeria: Human Relations Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory. Together, these theories provide a robust framework for understanding how PR strategies shape employee engagement, stakeholder cooperation, and public awareness, which are essential for SME growth and resilience. Each theory offers unique insights into how PR practices can build productive relationships, foster mutual trust, and influence public perception factors critical for organizational success in a competitive market.

Human Relations Theory

Human Relations Theory, introduced by Elton Mayo in 1933, emphasizes the importance of social and psychological factors in workplace productivity and employee satisfaction. Mayo's groundbreaking studies at Hawthorne Works in Chicago revealed that beyond material conditions, employees' sense of autonomy, involvement, and morale significantly impacted their output. For instance, Hawthorne experiments demonstrated that when workers were involved in decision-making, productivity increased, irrespective of physical conditions such as lighting or rest breaks. Mayo argued that an informal social environment, where workers have a sense of belonging and self-importance, could transcend individual self-interest and foster group cohesion, which in turn positively influences productivity. Human Relations Theory posits that workers are distinct from other organizational assets, as they require fulfillment, autonomy, and creativity. Organizations that recognize this distinction and actively engage employees in decision-making foster a sense of personal satisfaction and loyalty in their workforce. According to Judge (2002), this approach reduces workplace tensions and promotes a cooperative culture, while Gropanzan and Mitchell (2005) emphasize that organizations committed to employee development signal their dedication to workforce well-being. The theory suggests that effective employee relations are built on the foundation of mutual respect and engagement, which are essential for reducing organizational conflicts and achieving shared objectives.

Stakeholder Theory

Introduced by Edward Freeman in 1984, Stakeholder Theory argues that organizations do not operate in isolation, but rather depend on various stakeholders, including employees, investors, host communities, and customers, for their success. These stakeholders influence and are influenced by the organization's actions, making it crucial for businesses to engage with them in ways that foster trust, mutual understanding, and respect (Honey, 2013; Grunig & Hung, 2002). According to Donaldson and Preston (1995), organizations that consider the interests of key stakeholders and act in morally defensible ways are more likely to achieve market success. Moguluwa and Achor (2013) further highlight that cooperation and trust between a firm and its stakeholders leads to mutually beneficial outcomes, contributing to the organization's sustained success and reputation.

This theory underlines that stakeholders' identification with an organization strengthens when they see organizational actions as aligned with their core values. For example, community engagement initiatives, such as sponsorships, infrastructure development, employee recognition, and media relations, contribute to building stakeholder trust and encouraging patronage, which ultimately enhances performance. Thus, this theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the social dynamics and mutual dependencies between SMEs and their stakeholders, highlighting the importance of PR strategies that foster transparency, effective communication, and trust-building initiatives to ensure long-term organizational success.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, explores how media shapes public perception by emphasizing certain issues over others. According to this theory, the media holds significant power to influence what people think about, as its coverage dictates the public agenda by focusing on specific topics (McCombs, 2009). The theory's central tenet, salience transfer, asserts that mass media can transfer important issues from their own agenda to the public agenda. This influence is instrumental in shaping public awareness, knowledge, opinions, and attitudes toward an organization, thereby affecting public behavior, and consequently, organizational success.

Empirical studies have shown that media prominence can shape public opinion and bring organizational activities to the forefront, helping companies gain visibility and credibility (Jordan, 2008; Griffin, 2006). For SMEs, agenda-setting through PR and media campaigns can positively impact brand awareness and reputation, leading to increased patronage and support. By framing key messages and selecting focal issues, media relations enable organizations to drive public interest in their activities, ultimately influencing consumer attitudes and engagement.

Empirical Review

Employee Relations

Ojokuku (2014) explored the effect of employee participation on decision making and its impact on the performance of selected SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria. The study concludes that employee participation significantly enhances organizational performance. **Worlu et al. (2016)** examined employee relations strategies at Lagos State University, Nigeria. Their study focused on organizational policies regarding recognition, equity, promotion, and mentoring, and revealed the positive influence of these strategies on employee performance. Recommendations include prioritizing the management of flexible policies and equitable compensation to enhance employee efficiency. **Bamenda Titang (2016)** investigated the impact of internal communication on employee performance in organizations. Using a survey method, this study found that internal communication significantly affects employee productivity. Recommendations include improving communication resources and involving employees in the decision-making processes to foster a conducive communication environment. **Femi (2014)** studied the relationship between communication and worker performance in Lagos State and found a clear link between effective communication and employee productivity. The research recommends regular articulation of organizational policies and efficient communication channels to enhance performance. **Otieno et al. (2015)** focused on employee communication in the Kenyan horticultural sector. Their findings indicate that effective communication enhances operational efficiency, thus improving organizational performance. However, this study lacked formulated research questions and relevant theoretical frameworks. **Rajhans (2012)** examined the relationship between communication and employee motivation in India. While it highlighted the benefits of effective communication on motivation and productivity, it also faced criticism for lacking scientific rigor and clear focus. **Reni (2022)** demonstrated a positive relationship between employee relations and SME performance, thus contributing to the growing literature on employee relations.

Community Relations

Nworgu (2007) emphasizes the importance of community relations for organizational performance, urging SMEs to adopt proactive community development programs. **Udoudo (2007)** found that failure to recognize community interests leads to poor relationships among SMEs, recommending that public relations departments be staffed with management personnel. **Idemudia (2009)** suggested that effective community relations practices lead to improved long-term institutional performance. **Onyebamji and Alimi (2013)** highlight that community involvement enhances organizational goodwill and corporate image. **Ogodo and Adedowole (2014)** concluded that effective community relations practices yield benefits for both organizations and their host communities. **Carroll and Shabana (2010)** indicated that

community relations positively affect investment attraction and organizational image. **Alabi and Ntukekpo (2012)** likened community relations to marriage, emphasizing mutual responsibilities and benefits between organizations and communities. **Adeyemo Onyebamiji and Alimi (2013)** advocated viewing community relations as enlightened self-interest that yields long-term benefits.

Media Relations

Edit et al. (2015) established a positive relationship between media relations and organizational performance, asserting that positive media coverage attracts customers. **Jegade (2014)** focuses on the impact of media relations on product patronage and concludes that effective media relations significantly enhance customer patronage. **Okafor (2014)** examined the influence of electronic media on the sales growth of electronic products and found a strong correlation between effective media reports and increased sales. **Ojo and Adebisi (2018)** evaluated the effectiveness of social media in promoting computer sales, revealing that proper social media usage significantly boosted sales performance. **Awo Semuse and Peter (2023)** investigated the impact of public relations on Micmakin Nigeria Ltd. and found a significant correlation with organizational performance. **Kumar and Malik (2013)** studied the influence of mass media on customer satisfaction in hotels, and concluded that effective media engagement is crucial for enhancing business operations. **Dennis and York (2015)** assessed mass media interventions in government-owned hotels and found a significant positive impact on performance. **Zukah and Zimbah (2016)** examined the impact of traditional media on guesthouses' patronage, recommending its use for promoting rural businesses. **Jomo and Abaku (2017)** investigated trad-cultural communication in entertainment promotion and found a significantly positive relationship with patronage. **Jang and Kim (2016)** focused on media briefings in the hospitality industry and concluded that organized media engagement positively affects industry development.

Gap in Previous Studies and Significance of This Study

While extensive research has been conducted on PR and organizational performance, there is limited empirical focus on SMEs in South-East Nigeria, particularly concerning how PR practices can address the region's unique challenges, such as resource limitations and a competitive local market. Existing studies often generalize PR strategies without considering the cultural and economic contexts specific to South-East Nigeria, leaving a gap in understanding how localized PR strategies can enhance SME performance in this setting. Furthermore, the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in previous research is insufficient, and studies focusing on specific organizations of interest, such as Juhel Manufacturing Company and Innoson Technical and Industrial Company Ltd, are sparse. This study fills this gap by examining the effects of targeted PR strategies, including employee

relations, community engagement, and media relations, on SME performance in South-East Nigeria. It provides a contextual understanding of PR's impact of PR on SMEs operating within a dynamic local market and investigates how theories such as human relations, stakeholders, and agenda-setting can be applied to address challenges unique to this environment.

Contribution and Novelty of the Study

The contribution of this study lies in its application of PR theories to the practical challenges faced by SMEs in South-East Nigeria, offering a comprehensive framework that combines employee, community, and media engagement to drive organizational growth. By integrating insights from human relations, stakeholders, and agenda-setting theories, this study offers a holistic perspective on how SMEs can effectively leverage PR to build trust, increase brand visibility, and foster supportive relationships with internal and external stakeholders. Additionally, it underscores the importance of culturally adapted PR strategies that align with local stakeholder expectations, thereby contributing to the knowledge of regional PR applications in SME performance. The findings of this study are anticipated to be valuable to SME leaders, PR practitioners, and policymakers by providing actionable recommendations for implementing PR strategies that enhance resilience, promote growth, and improve performance in challenging business environments. Through its novel approach of blending theoretical insights with empirical analysis, this study adds depth to the understanding of PR's role of PR in regional SME success, and establishes a foundation for future research on context-specific PR strategies.

Methodology

The survey research design was adopted because of its ability to gather original data from respondents, describe real-world situations, and capture the natural setting of the issues under investigation. This design allowed for a sample representing the population, which aligns well with the objectives of the study. A well-structured questionnaire was developed as the primary instrument for the data collection. The questionnaire included both structured (closed-ended) and unstructured (open-ended) questions, which enabled respondents to provide detailed answers. A 5-point Likert scale was employed to measure responses, ensuring consistency and ease of analysis.

Area of Study/Population

The study covered three areas in selected states in southeastern Nigeria: Abakaliki Rice Mill Company in Ebonyi State (Abakaliki LGA), Juhel Pharmaceutical Company in Anambra State (Awka South LGA), and Innoson Technical and Industrial Company Ltd. in Enugu State (Enugu East LGA). These locations were chosen because of their significance in representing the SMEs in the region. The study population includes stakeholders associated with SMEs. The exact population size is unknown as the

stakeholders involved vary. Therefore, the study sample was derived using an appropriate statistical formula.

Sample Size

The sample size was determined using the Freund and Williams (1958) formula, which is suitable because the population size was unknown. A pilot survey with 40 respondents indicated that 22 (55% positive) were stakeholders, 18 (45% negative) were made up of unreturned copies, and those who averred that they were not stakeholders of the SMEs being investigated. By applying a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the sample size was determined to be 380.

The formular for Freund and Williams (1958) is:

$$n = \frac{Z_{pq}^2}{e^2}$$

where:

n = Sample size

p = Percentage of Positive Response

q = Percentage of Negative Response

e = Percentage of Error

z = Normal Variant for the desired level of confidence

The percentages of positive and negative responses are therefore.

$$= \frac{22}{40} \times \frac{100}{1} = 55$$

$$= \frac{18}{40} \times \frac{100}{1} = 45$$

Therefore, we substitute to obtain n

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times (0.55) \times (0.45)}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$= 380.0 = 380$$

Thus, the sample size for the study is 380.

Reliability of the Research Instrument

The reliability of the research instrument was established through a test-retest method using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.87, indicating high reliability. This result underscores the instrument's capacity to produce consistent results over time.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards by informing the participants of its purpose, procedures, and potential benefits. Confidence and anonymity were ensured, participation was voluntary, and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Model Specifications

Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used. The descriptive tools, including frequency tables, percentages, and means, provided an overview of the data. Inferential tools, specifically Pearson's correlation and classical linear regression, were used to evaluate the relationships between the variables.

A 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) was adopted, with a decision rule where mean scores of 2.50 or above indicated agreement with the hypotheses, while scores below this threshold indicated disagreement. To ensure precision and robustness, the Best Linear Unbiased Estimator (BLUE) is utilized under the Gauss-Markov theorem.

The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model, which is essential for empirical studies, was employed because of its unbiased and efficient estimates, which are essential for analyzing the impact of the currency redesign policy on household welfare in Nigeria. Compared to previous models, the OLS method allows for a straightforward interpretation of coefficients and facilitates control for multiple covariates, which are crucial for isolating the policy's effect from confounding variables such as income, education, and household size. Therefore, the OLS method offers a statistically robust and precise model for the analysis, enhancing the accuracy and reliability of the study's findings.

4. Results and Discussion

Questionnaire Response Rate

A total of 380 questionnaires were administered digitally and manually to respondents from the Abakaliki Rice Mill Company, Juhel Pharmaceutical Company, and Innoson Technical and Industrial Company Limited across South-East Nigeria. Of these, 368 questionnaires were completed and returned, yielding a 96.8% response rate, which is considered excellent by established standards (Morton et al., 2012; Saldivar, 2012; Agustini, 2018). This high response rate strengthens the reliability of the study and provides a robust foundation for analyzing the effects of public relations (PR) on the performance of SMEs in the region.

Table 1 Questionnaire Response Rate

Response Rate					
Valid	Response	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Complete	368	96.8	96.8	100.0
	Incomplete	12	3.2	3.2	
	Total	385	100.0	100.0	

Source: Author's Survey (2024)

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Gender Distribution

The gender distribution of the respondents showed that 53.3% were female and 46.7% were male. This slight female predominance highlights the importance of developing sex-inclusive PR strategies. Tailoring communications to engage both male and female stakeholders can foster a more inclusive environment that acknowledges different perspectives within SMEs in South-East Nigeria.

Age Distribution

Respondents were predominantly aged 26-45 (52.2%), highlighting a younger, middle-aged workforce in SMEs. Given the varying communication preferences across age groups, PR strategies should combine both digital and traditional methods. While younger employees may prefer digital PR, older groups may favor traditional communication, allowing SMEs to engage effectively across age demographics and improve the adoption of PR initiatives, especially in contexts with limited technological literacy.

Educational Qualifications

Educational qualifications ranged from PhD holders (7.3%) to those with WASC (23.4%), with the largest segment being graduates (34.3%). This diversity suggests the need for PR content tailored to different education levels. Highly qualified employees could benefit from more technical, research-based PR content, while simpler, accessible language should be used for those with lower qualifications to foster inclusion. This approach can enhance engagement by ensuring that PR messages resonate across different educational backgrounds.

Job Position

Most respondents were from lower cadres (61.9%), with 38.1% in senior positions. This distribution emphasizes the need for PR efforts to engage employees at all levels, not just senior management. By including lower-level employees in PR strategies, SMEs can foster a culture of inclusion and empowerment that positively impacts their overall performance.

Table2.Demographic Profile of Respondents

Panel A		Gender		
		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	172	46.7	46.7
	Female	196	53.3	100.0
	Total	368	100.0	
Panel B		Age Range		
		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent

Valid	16-26	37	10.1	10.1
	26-35	93	25.3	100.0
	36-45	99	26.9	
	46-55	82	22.3	
	56-65	20	5.4	
	66-above	37	10.1	
	Total	368	100	
Panel C Academic Qualification				
		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Ph.D	27	7.3	7.3
	MSC	73	19.8	100.0
	Graduate	126	34.3	
	NCE	56	15.2	
	WASC	86	23.4	
	Total	368	100	
Panel D Position				
		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Senior cadre	140	38.1	38.1
	Lower cadre	228	61.9	100.0
	Total	368	100	

Source: Author (2024)

Company Representation

Each of the three companies was equally represented in the study, with a mean response distribution of 122.67 (SD=0.4714), indicating consistency in data collection across companies. This balanced representation allows for generalized PR insights that can be applied uniformly; however, nuanced PR strategies may still be tailored to each company's unique stakeholder needs and preferences.

Table 3: Representation of Respondents by SMEs in Focus

SMEs		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Abakaliki Rice Mill Company	122	33.2	16.8
	Juhel Pharmaceutitcal company	123	33.4	33.3
	Innoson Technical and Industrial Company Limited.	123	33.4	49.9
	Total	368	100	
	Mean	122.67	Std. Dev	0.4714
	Minimum	1	Maximum	3

Source: Author (2023)

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire items, which resulted in a high reliability coefficient of 0.919. This confirms that the questionnaire reliably measured the effect of PR on SMEs' performance.

Table 4. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha		N of Items
Questionnaire	.919	23

Source: Author (2024)

Rule Decision: H_0 : Rejects H_0 and accepts H_1 if Cronbach's alpha (α) is greater than or equal to 0.70 H_0 : Accept H_0 and reject H_1 if Cronbach's alpha (α) is less than 0.70.

Responses to Key Public Relations Factors in SMEs

Employee Relations: Internal communication methods, particularly internal memos (mean=3.87) and notice boards (mean=3.76), were highly rated to effectively convey information about responsibilities and policies and improve employee understanding and compliance. Staff meetings also scored high (mean=3.86), suggesting that they are essential for timely and cooperative engagement within SMEs. However, personal briefings (mean=3.16) and supervisor training (mean=3.41) were rated lower, indicating areas of improvement. Enhancing personal briefings and supervisor-led training would benefit SMEs by creating a better-informed and motivated workforce, particularly when bilingual materials (English and Igbo) are used to bridge the language and educational gaps.

Table: 5. Responses on statement on employee relations in SMEs in South-East Nigeria.

S/N	Statement on Employee Relations	SA	A	UD	D	SD	Mean
1	Internal memos present clear information concerning responsibilities in the organisation	180	86	23	33	46	3.87
2	Internal memos give reliable information concerning workplace policies.	170	96	13	40	49	3.81
3	The information received through notice boards helps to increase knowledge of workplace policies.	140	126	10	43	63	3.76
4	Staff meeting provide clear information about activities that solicit cooperation.	150	116	5	45	66	3.76
5	Staff meetings help to keep informed of vital information that requires timely attention.	180	96	3	40	49	3.86
6	House journals that contain positive reports on employee achievements inspire one to work very hard for the success of organisation	120	101	4	114	29	3.46
7	Personal briefings provide me accurate information on how to perform my duties effectively.	100	93	6	103	66	3.16
8	Supervisor give training on how to perform job effectively.	130	95	5	70	68	3.41

Source: Author (2024)

Community Relations: Community relations activities, such as providing employment (mean=3.86) and engaging in regular meetings with community leaders (mean=3.87), were perceived as highly effective for fostering community loyalty and patronage. Environmental sustainability (mean=3.65) positively influenced community relationships. While sponsorship programs (mean=3.21) and the provision of basic amenities (mean=3.54) were somewhat effective, these initiatives have the potential to better align with community needs. By actively involving the community in assessing local needs and responding to tailored programs, SMEs can build stronger relationships, enhance their reputations, and secure long-term community support.

Table: 6. Responses on statement on community relations in SMEs in South-East Nigeria.

	Statement on Community Relations	SA	A	UD	D	SD	Mean
1	The SMEs sponsorship programme attracts our community to their products and services	120	80	2	100	70	3.21
2	The conduction of needs assessment of the community in liason with the community members and the implementation attracts loyalty to the SMEs	130	92	2	80	64	3.39
3	The provision of employment opportunity by the SMEs attracts patronage intention.	170	110	5	33	50	3.86
4	provision of basic amenities like water, electricity health centres make me to go for the SMEs products	130	100	10	94	34	3.54
5	The environmental sustainability approach by the SMEs promotes the relationship between community and the SMEs	150	96	4	80	38	3.65
6	The constant meeting of community leaders with the management of the SMEs for mutual co-existence enhances the SMEs performance	180	86	23	33	46	3.87

Source: Author (2024)

Media Relations: Social media advertisements (mean=4.06) emerged as the most impactful media strategy for driving patronage, showcasing the potential of digital media to reach and engage broader audiences effectively. Documentaries (mean=3.54) and media projections of activities (mean=3.92) are also beneficial for building visibility and credibility. However, confidence in referrals based on media conferences (mean=3.16) and editorial writing (mean=3.25) was moderate, indicating that while these traditional media avenues are valuable, they require further enhancement. Strengthening PR through diverse media platforms and focusing on impactful narratives can further amplify SMEs' reach and reputation, contributing to improved performance and growth in South-East Nigeria.

Table: 7. Responses on statement on media relations in SMEs in South-East Nigeria.

	Statement on Media Relations	SA	A	UD	D	SD	Mean
1	Documentary productions help one to know the services and facilities that are available in an SMEs	130	92	2	80	64	3.39
2	One can be easily attracted to SMEs that use documentary to showcase their services and facilities	130	100	10	94	34	3.54
3	I can feel more confident to refer my associates to SMEs I have seen their documentaries.	130	95	3	70	68	3.39
4	Editorial writings sway interest on which SME to patronize	120	101	4	114	29	3.46
5	I am confident that are been promoted via editorial writings on newspapers	100	101	3	117	47	3.25
6	SMEs adverts on social media can cause one to patronize them.	180	116	2	54	16	4.06
7	One feel more confident to refer people to patronize SMEs that he has have read reports of their media conferences	100	93	6	103	66	3.16
8	Our Relationship with the media has projected our activities to an advantage	170	110	6	32	50	3.86
9	The projection of our products and service to the public has improved our performance based on feedback	170	105	5	50	56	3.92

Source: Author (2024)

The responses to key public relations factors in SMEs revealed that public relations practices tailored to specific demographics, community expectations, and media preferences can significantly enhance SME performance in South-East Nigeria. Internal communication, community involvement, and diverse media engagements, particularly digital platforms, have emerged as crucial PR tools for improving visibility, stakeholder relationships, and overall organizational performance. SMEs should consider a mixed approach in PR, combining digital outreach for younger

audiences and traditional methods for older and less technologically inclined stakeholders while tailoring messages for varied educational backgrounds.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H₀: Employee relations do not have a significant impact on SMEs performance in South East Nigeria.

Table 8. Model Summary^b

Model Summary^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.979 ^a	.957	.957	.27961	0.211
a. Predictors: (Constant), Internal memos present clear information concerning responsibilities in the organisation; Internal memos give reliable information concerning workplace policies; The information received through notice boards helps to increase knowledge of workplace policies; Staff meeting provide clear information about activities that solicit cooperation; Staff meetings help to keep informed of vital information that requires timely attention; House journals that contain positive reports on employee achievements inspire one to work very hard for the success of organisation; Personal briefings provide me accurate information on how to perform my duties effectively; Supervisor give training on how to perform job effectively.					
b. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance					

Source: Author (2024)

Table 8. ANOVA^a

ANOVA^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	631.759	8	78.970	1010.094	.000 ^b
	Residual	28.067	359	.078		
	Total	659.826	367			
a. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Internal memos present clear information concerning responsibilities in the organisation; Internal memos give reliable information concerning workplace policies; The information received through notice boards helps to increase knowledge of workplace policies; Staff meeting provide clear information about activities that solicit cooperation; Staff meetings help to keep informed of vital information that requires timely attention; House journals that						

contain positive reports on employee achievements inspire one to work very hard for the success of organisation; Personal briefings provide me accurate information on how to perform my duties effectively; Supervisor give training on how to perform job effectively.

Source: Author (2024)

Table 9. Coefficients^a

Coefficients^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	-.235	.071		-3.286	.001		
	Internal memos present clear information concerning responsibilities in the organisation;	.167	.048	.171	3.454	.001	.049	1.575
	Internal memos give reliable information concerning workplace policies.	.057	.043	.060	1.335	.183	.059	1.828
	The information received through notice boards helps to increase knowledge of workplace policies.	.435	.045	.484	9.614	.000	.047	1.415
	Staff meeting	.154	.036	.117	4.295	.000	.161	1.225

provide clear information about activities that solicit cooperation.								
Staff meetings help to keep informed of vital information that requires timely attention.	.157	.049	.107	3.205	.001	.106	1.428	
House journals that contain positive reports on employee achievements inspire one to work very hard for the success of organisation	.151	.092	.056	1.637	.103	.100	1.024	
Personal briefings provide me accurate information on how to perform my duties effectively.	-.136	.034	-.138	- 3.993	.000	.099	1.143	
Supervisor give training on how to perform job effectively.	.403	.055	.195	7.260	.000	.164	1.110	
a. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance								

Source: Author (2024)

Based on the regression results presented in Tables 7–9, employee relations were found to have a substantial positive effect on SMEs performance, with an R-squared value of 0.957, indicating that 95.7% of the variance in SME performance is explained by the model. This high R-squared value implies a robust fit, suggesting

that internal communication and employee development practices play critical roles in influencing performance.

The F-statistic of the regression model (1010.094, $p < 0.000$) and a low Durbin-Watson value (0.211) further confirmed the stability and significance of the model, while ruling out issues with first-order positive autocorrelation. The ANOVA reinforces the finding that the independent variables—various facets of internal communication and training—have a statistically significant influence on SME performance, with $F(8,359) = 1010.094$, $p < 0.000$. This suggests that well-implemented employee relations strategies positively affect SMEs in South-East Nigeria, aligning with theoretical frameworks such as Human Relations Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory.

Impact of Specific Communication Channels and Practices

The results indicate that clear internal communication through channels, such as notice boards (43.5%), significantly improves SME performance. This aligns with **Stakeholder Theory**, which emphasizes the importance of transparent communication with all organizational stakeholders to ensure alignment and engagement. Notice boards, as accessible and reliable sources of information, help employees stay informed of workplace policies, enhance their productivity, and contribute to organizational success.

Internal memos with clear information on responsibilities also significantly affected performance, explaining 16.7% of the variance. Similarly, **Human Relations Theory** highlights the role of effective communication in fostering job satisfaction and productivity by addressing employees' informational needs and expectations. Staff meetings, contributing 15.4% and 15.7% (for timely updates), respectively, further underscore the significance of open communication in aligning employee actions with organizational objectives, fostering cooperation, and responsiveness. This aligns with **Agenda-Setting Theory**, which suggests that regular, informative staff meetings help in setting priorities and aligning employees' focus on organizational goals.

Role of Supervisor-Provided Training

The training provided by supervisors has a profound impact on performance, with a significant positive effect of 40.3%. This finding supports **Human Relations Theory** by demonstrating the value of developing employees through skill-based training, which enhances job performance and satisfaction. Supervisor-led training ensures that employees have the tools and knowledge necessary to perform effectively, which can improve organizational efficiency and success.

Effectiveness of Personal Briefings

Interestingly, personal briefings had a negative impact of 13.6% on SME performance, indicating that the current approach to personal briefings may be ineffective or even counterproductive. This suggests that neither the content nor

delivery of these briefings may resonate well with employees, which calls for a review of the briefing process to better meet employees' expectations or informational needs. The findings of this study are consistent with those of several empirical studies, including Ojokuku (2014), Worlu et al. (2016), and Femi (2014), which emphasize the importance of strategic internal communication and training on organizational performance. These studies support the conclusion that well-managed employee relations strategies, specifically those that promote effective communication and training, are crucial for enhancing SMEs' performance. The analysis rejects the null hypothesis (H_0), affirming that employee relations positively and significantly impact SME performance in South-East Nigeria. By leveraging effective communication and structured training practices, SMEs in this region can improve organizational outcomes, aligning with **Human Relations Theory**, **Stakeholder Theory**, and **Agenda-Setting Theory**. These results underscore the importance of adopting communication strategies that foster clarity, accessibility, and employee development, thus supporting a strong foundation for organizational performance in the SMEs sector.

Hypothesis Two

H_0 : Community relations do not have a significant impact on SMEs performance in South East Nigeria.

Table: 10 Model Summary^b

Model Summary^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.978 ^a	.957	.956	.30439	.210
a. Predictors: (Constant), The SMEs sponsorship programme attracts our community to their products and services; The conduction of needs assessment of the community in liason with the community members and the implementation attracts loyalty to the SMEs; The provision of employment opportunity by the SMEs attracts patronage intention. provision of basic amenities like water, electricity health centres make me to go for the SMEs products. The environmental sustainability approach by the SMEs promotes the relationship between community and the SMEs. The constant meeting of community leaders with the management of the SMEs for mutual co-existence enhances the SMEs performance					
b. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance					

Source: Author (2024)

Table: 11. ANOVA^a

ANOVA^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	733.909	8	91.739	990.137	.000 ^b
	Residual	33.262	359	.093		
	Total	767.171	367			
a. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance						
b. Predictors: (Constant), The SMEs sponsorship programme attracts our community to their products and services; The conduction of needs assessment of the community in liason with the community members and the implementation attracts loyalty to the SMEs; The provision of employment opportunity by the SMEs attracts patronage intention. provision of basic amenities like water, electricity health centres make me to go for the SMEs products. The environmental sustainability approach by the SMEs promotes the relationship between community and the SMEs. The constant meeting of community leaders with the management of the SMEs for mutual co-existence enhances the SMEs performance						

Source: Author (2024)

Table: 12. Coefficients^a

Coefficients^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.324	.078		4.168	.000		
	The SMEs sponsorship programme attracts our community to their products and services	.264	.053	.250	5.010	.000	.049	1.575
	The conduction	1.099	.047	1.061	23.540	.000	.059	1.828

of needs assessment of the community in liason with the community members and the implementation attracts loyalty to the SMEs								
The provision of employment opportunity by the SMEs attracts patronage intention.	.229	.049	.236	4.642	.000	.047	1.415	
Provision of basic amenities like water, electricity health centres make me to go for the SMEs products	.376	.039	.264	9.642	.000	.161	1.225	
The environmental sustainability approach by the SMEs promotes the relationship between community and the SMEs	.131	.053	.083	2.463	.014	.106	1.428	

	The constant meeting of community leaders with the management of the SMEs for mutual co-existence enhances the SMEs performance	.435	.101	.151	4.328	.000	.100	1.024
a. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance								

Source; Author (2024)

The results of the regression analysis indicate a strong and statistically significant relationship between community relations practices and SMEs performance, as evidenced by the R-squared value of 0.97. This high R-squared value suggests that 97% of the variance in SMEs performance is explained by the model, indicating that community relations activities are crucial for enhancing performance. The F-statistic (990.137, $p < 0.000$) and the Durbin-Watson value of 0.21 confirm the stability and reliability of the model, further supported by the ANOVA results, which affirm the significant predictive value of the independent variables on SMEs performance.

Key Findings and Theoretical Alignment

1. **SMEs Sponsorship Programs:** Sponsorship of community programs by SMEs has a positive impact on performance by 26.4% ($B = 0.264$, $p < .001$). This outcome aligns with **Stakeholder Theory**, which underscores the role of engaging stakeholders such as community members to improve organizational visibility and reputation. **Agenda-Setting Theory** also supports this result, as sponsorship programs act as a strategic communication tool that places SMEs in a favorable light, making their products and services more attractive to the community. McCombs and Shaw (2018) confirm that agenda-setting through sponsorships can enhance visibility and, subsequently, performance.
2. **Needs Assessment and Community Engagement:** Conducting needs assessments in collaboration with community members contributed significantly to performance, with an impact of 109.9% ($B = 1.099$, $p < .001$). **Human Relations Theory** supports this finding by emphasizing the importance of understanding and responding to community needs, which fosters loyalty and builds positive relationships. Similarly, **Stakeholder Theory** suggests that, by addressing community interests, SMEs can build trust and loyalty, leading to improved performance. This is consistent with the

findings of Robbins (2020) and Freeman (2018), who stressed that fulfilling stakeholder needs enhances organizational reputation and long-term success.

3. **Employment Opportunities:** The provision of employment opportunities by SMEs has a positive impact on performance, contributing 22.9% ($B = 0.229$, $p < .001$). This aligns with **Human Relations Theory**, which posits that creating employment fosters positive relationships and social support within the community, enhancing organizational performance. The **Stakeholder Theory** perspective also supports this finding, as providing employment meets a critical community need, fostering goodwill and encouraging community patronage. Empirical studies by Freeman (2018) and McGregor (2019) affirm the link between employment practices and improved organizational outcomes.
4. **Provision of Basic Amenities:** By offering basic amenities, such as water, electricity, and healthcare, SMEs improved their performance by 37.6% ($B = 0.376$, $p < .001$). This finding is supported by **Stakeholder Theory**, which argues that addressing essential community needs strengthens organizational reputations and enhances loyalty. **Human Relations Theory** also aligns, suggesting that providing essential services fosters a positive relationship with the community, leading to better organizational outcomes. Donaldson and Preston (2017) corroborated these findings, emphasizing the importance of meeting community needs for improved performance.
5. **Environmental Sustainability Practices:** SMEs' adoption of environmentally sustainable practices positively influenced performance by 13.1% ($B = 0.131$, $p < .05$). According to **Stakeholder Theory**, SMEs engaging in sustainable practices demonstrate responsibility toward the community, enhancing goodwill and performance. **Human Relations Theory** further suggests that sustainable practices build trust and long-term relationships. Supporting empirical studies, including Freeman (2018), highlights that addressing environmental concerns can lead to positive community perceptions and improved organizational performance.
6. **Regular Meetings with Community Leaders:** Frequent engagement between SME management and community leaders improved performance by 43.5% ($B = 0.435$, $p < .001$), indicating the importance of ongoing communication and mutual understanding. This finding aligns with **Human Relations Theory**, which advocates regular engagement to foster trust and positive relationships. Similarly, **Stakeholder Theory** suggests that SMEs demonstrate commitment to their stakeholders by prioritizing open dialogue with community representatives, leading to improved performance. Empirical studies by Robbins (2020) and Donaldson and Preston (2017) support this

view, highlighting the significance of stakeholder engagement in enhancing organizational outcomes.

In line with the decision rule, the null hypothesis is rejected, affirming that community relations significantly and positively impact SMEs performance in South-East Nigeria. These findings align with Human Relations Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory, suggesting that strategic community engagement practices, including sponsorships, needs assessments, and sustainable practices, are integral to enhancing organizational performance. These results are consistent with those of Nwankwo and Okeke (2021) and Chukwuemeka (2020), which emphasize the critical role of community relations in organizational success. This research underscores the importance of community relations as a strategic tool for SMEs to improve performance through effective stakeholder engagement and communication.

Hypothesis Three

H₀: Media relations do not have a significant impact on SMEs performance in South East Nigeria.

Table: 13. Model Summary^b

Model Summary^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.980 ^a	.960	.959	.27259	.256
a. Predictors: (Constant), Documentary productions help one to know the services and facilities that are available in an SMEs. One can be easily attracted to SMEs that use documentary to showcase their services and facilities. I can feel more confident to refer my associates to SMEs I have seen their documentaries. Editorial writings sway interest on which SME to patronize. I am confident that are been promoted via editorial writings on newspapers. SMEs adverts on social media can cause one to patronize them. One feel more confident to refer people to patronize SMEs that he has have read reports of their media conferences. Our Relationship with the media has projected our activities to an advantage. The projection of our products and service to the public has improved our performance based on feedback.					
b. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance					

Source; Author (2024)

Table: 14. ANOVA^a

ANOVA^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	633.226	9	70.358	946.917	.000 ^b
	Residual	26.600	358	.074		
	Total	659.826	367			

a. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance

Documentary productions help one to know the services and facilities that are available in an SMEs. One can be easily attracted to SMEs that use documentary to showcase their services and facilities. I can feel more confident to refer my associates to SMEs I have seen their documentaries. Editorial writings sway interest on which SME to patronize. I am confident that are been promoted via editorial writings on newspapers. SMEs adverts on social media can cause one to patronize them. One feel more confident to refer people to patronize SMEs that he has have read reports of their media conferences. Our Relationship with the media has projected our activities to an advantage. The projection of our products and service to the public has improved our performance based on feedback.

Source; Author (2024)

Table: 15. Coefficients^a

Coefficients^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standard ized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.306	.071		4.276	.000		
	Documentary productions help one to know the services and facilities that are available in an SMEs	.143	.048	.146	3.015	.003	.048	2.844
	One can be easily attracted to SMEs that use	.224	.076	.233	2.952	.003	.018	1.368

	documentary to showcase their services and facilities							
	I can feel more confident to refer my associates to SMEs I have seen their documentaries.	.480	.045	.534	10.604	.000	.044	1.536
	Editorial writings sway interest on which SME to patronize	.203	.037	.154	5.551	.000	.146	2.863
	I am confident that are been promoted via editorial writings on newspapers	.101	.049	.069	2.037	.042	.099	1.093
	SMEs adverts on social media can cause one to patronize them.	.259	.093	.097	2.775	.006	.093	1.749
	One feel more confident to refer people to patronize SMEs that he has have read reports of their media conferences	.175	.034	.178	5.088	.000	.092	1.839
	Our Relationship with the media has projected our activities to an advantage	.411	.054	.199	7.597	.000	.163	2.118

	The projection of our products and service to the public has improved our performance based on feedback	.252	.057	.269	4.443	.000	.031	2.450
a. Dependent Variable: SMEs performance								

Source; Author (2024)

The analysis indicates that media relations significantly enhance the performance of SMEs in South-East Nigeria through strategic communication activities such as documentaries, editorials, and social media promotions. These findings are supported by Agenda-Setting Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Human Relations Theory, each underscoring how strategic media engagements and relationship-building practices drive visibility, trust, and community engagement. The results show that media-related activities account for 98% of the variance in SME performance, thus demonstrating a substantial positive impact.

Documentary production increases SME performance by 14.6%, as SMEs inform and attract the community to the products and services offered. This supports the Agenda-Setting Theory, suggesting that documentaries help SMEs set a public agenda by increasing awareness and highlighting their offerings (McCombs & Shaw, 2018). Similarly, Edit et al. (2015) found that media visibility enhances customer attraction and retention. Additionally, documentaries' ability to attract customers to SMEs through effective showcasing leads to a 22.4% improvement in performance. This aligns with both Agenda-Setting Theory and Stakeholder Theory, indicating that documentary content can direct public attention to SMEs' offerings while establishing SMEs as valuable community partners (Jegade, 2014).

Confidence in referring to others based on documentary content yielded a 48% increase in SME performance, highlighting a robust trust factor. The Human Relations Theory underscores that transparent communication builds trust and confidence among stakeholders, making clients more inclined to recommend SMEs to others (Robbins, 2020; McGregor, 2019). Okafor (2014) found that positive media narratives increased customer confidence and loyalty. Editorials also sway customer interest, impacting SME performance by 20.3%, with Agenda-Setting Theory supporting that editorials serve as strategic tools for opinion-shaping (McCombs & Shaw, 2018). This finding aligns with that of Ojo and Adebisi (2018), who demonstrated that media outreach through editorial content directly influences customer patronage.

Confidence in SMEs promoted through editorials, though yielding a smaller effect of 10.1%, shows the importance of reputation building in enhancing stakeholder trust and engagement, as outlined in Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 2018). This finding is consistent with Kumar and Malik (2013), who report that media exposure significantly affects customer satisfaction. Social media advertising bolsters SME performance by 25.9%, an effect underscored by the Agenda-Setting Theory, as digital platforms effectively shape public perceptions (McCombs & Shaw, 2018). Dennis and York (2015) found similar results, noting the positive influence of social media on client acquisition and loyalty.

Confidence in referrals from media reports has a significant positive influence, enhancing SME performance by 17.5%. This reflects both Stakeholder Theory and Human Relations Theory, which support the importance of consistent, transparent media reporting to build trust within communities (Robbins, 2020; McGregor, 2019). Similarly, Zukah and Zimbah (2016) noted the influence of traditional media on business patronage in rural areas, reinforcing the value of media credibility. Media relationships, through the continuous projection of activities, contribute 41.1% to improved SME performance. This finding is supported by Stakeholder Theory because establishing strong media relations ensures that SMEs meet stakeholder expectations, which in turn enhances community trust (Freeman, 2018). Human Relations Theory echoes this sentiment by emphasizing the significance of relationship-building through effective communication (Awo Semuse & Peter, 2023). Finally, product and service projections through media engagements improve SME performance by 25.2%, emphasizing the Agenda-Setting Theory's proposition that well-publicized offerings shape customer perceptions and drive engagement (McCombs & Shaw, 2018). This effect aligns with Jang and Kim (2016), who find that media outreach is instrumental in increasing business patronage. These findings confirm that media relations play a pivotal role in enhancing SME performance by promoting visibility, establishing trust, and engaging communities. Supported by contemporary studies, the results underscore that public relations strategies, such as documentaries, editorials, and social media advertisements, are instrumental to organizational success in the context of South-East Nigerian SMEs.

This study significantly advances the field of public relations as applied to SME performance management in South-East Nigeria, with contributions in stakeholder engagement, employee relations, community interaction, and media relations. By analyzing these dimensions, this study provides a nuanced view of the role of public relations in enhancing SME success, drawing on both theoretical foundations and practical implications.

Contributes to knowledge

This study contributes significantly to SME research by focusing on South-East Nigeria and examining how relational dynamics uniquely affect SME performance.

Targeted segmentation into employee, community, and media relations provides a detailed view of how these specific dimensions drive performance. This approach enriches the literature on SMEs by highlighting actionable practices that enhance performance with insights that can be applied to similar contexts.

The study's use of robust statistical metrics, such as R^2 values, F-statistics, Durbin-Watson tests, and ANOVA, strengthens the reliability of the findings, offering precise data that underscores the validity of its regression models. This rigorous methodology enhances confidence in the conclusions drawn, making the findings highly relevant to policymakers and SME managers.

The cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of relational dynamics and serves as a foundation for future longitudinal studies, inviting researchers to investigate the lasting effects of engagement strategies on employee communication, community relations, and media presence. Policymakers and practitioners can use these findings to shape effective communication, training, community sponsorship, and media engagement strategies for sustainable stakeholder relationships.

Finally, the study's alignment with Agenda-Setting Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Human Relations Theory offers theoretical depth by empirically validating these frameworks within a regional SME context. This integration demonstrates the applicability of these theories in real-world settings, bridging academic knowledge with practice and establishing a solid foundation for future research into SME performance management. Together, these contributions present a roadmap for advancing SME performance through structured, theory-backed public relations strategies.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the impact of public relations on SME performance in South-East Nigeria, emphasizing three primary domains: employee, community, and media relations. The findings reveal that strategic public relations efforts substantially enhance SME performance by aligning with human relations, stakeholder, and agenda-setting theories. These findings underscore the critical role of integrated public relations strategies encompassing employee, community, and media relations in driving SME performance. They provide SMEs with a clear roadmap for strategic communication and stakeholder engagement, aimed at improving both operational efficiency and community trust. To enhance SME performance in South-East Nigeria, this study recommends improving internal communication and employee development through accessible channels, regular staff meetings, and targeted training programs, while reassessing briefing methods for effectiveness. Community engagement should be strengthened through sponsorships, needs assessments, provision of essential amenities, and meetings with community leaders to build mutual trust. Optimizing media relations through active social media, positive media relationships, and engagement monitoring are

also crucial. Additionally, promoting environmental sustainability through eco-friendly practices, transparency in sustainability initiatives, and continuous feedback collection can foster stakeholder relationships and support long-term success.

References

1. Chukwuemeka, E. (2020). *Impact of corporate social responsibility on customer loyalty in Nigeria. International Journal of Business and Management*, 15(4), 45-59.
2. Donaldson, T., & Preston, L. E. (2017). *The stakeholder theory of the corporation: Concepts, evidence, and implications. Academy of Management Review*, 20(1), 65-91.
3. Freeman, R. E. (2018). *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach. Cambridge University Press*.
4. Maamaa, Z.N. (2011) *Corporate Public Relations approaches in Niger Delta Communities relations Jounrnal of Corporate Communications* 4 (2) 106-111.
5. McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (2018). *The agenda-setting function of mass media. Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187.
6. McGregor, D. (2019). *The Human Side of Enterprise. McGraw-Hill Education*.
7. Nwankwo, S., & Okeke, A. (2021). *Effect of public relations on the performance of SMEs in Nigeria. Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship Development*, 9(1), 22-36.
8. Robbins, S. P. (2020). *Organizational Behavior (18th Edition). Pearson Education*.