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*Research Article*

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# Influence of Entrepreneurial Alertness on Small and Medium Enterprises' Survival in North Central Nigeria: The Mediating Role of Strategic Flexibility

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the influence of entrepreneurial alertness on Small and Medium Enterprises' survival in North Central Nigeria, with strategic flexibility as a mediating variable. The study adopted a quantitative survey research design. The population comprised 9,586 medium enterprises across Benue, Kwara, Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau and the Federal Capital Territory. A sample of 384 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's formula at 5% error margin and allocated proportionately with Bowley's formula. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, while secondary data came from relevant literature. The instrument was validated through expert assessment, and reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha, with overall index of 0.837. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27.0, applying regression and mediation analysis at 5% significance level. The model was statistically significant, $F(3,380) = 7.256$, $p = .000$, with $R = .764$, $R^2 = .654$, and adjusted $R^2 = .467$. Findings showed that scanning and searching positively influenced SMEs survival ($B = .128$, $p = .010$), while evaluation and judgment negatively influenced survival ($B = -.181$, $p = .001$). Scanning and searching negatively affected strategic flexibility ($B = -.185$, $p = .000$), whereas evaluation and judgment positively affected strategic flexibility ($B = .208$, $p = .000$). Strategic flexibility positively influenced SMEs survival ($B = .128$, $p = .010$). The study concluded that entrepreneurial alertness and strategic flexibility are important for SMEs survival. It recommended improved environmental scanning, opportunity evaluation, flexible strategies, training and supportive policy.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurial Alertness, SMEs Survival, Scanning and Searching, Evaluation and Judgment, Strategic Flexibility.

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## Introduction

The modern business environment has become increasingly complex, uncertain, and competitive, making entrepreneurial alertness an important cognitive capability for SMEs. Entrepreneurial alertness refers to the ability of entrepreneurs to notice, interpret, and exploit business opportunities that others may overlook. Recent studies show that entrepreneurial alertness contributes to opportunity recognition, innovation, strategic decision-making, and organizational performance among SMEs [1,2]. As business conditions continue to change rapidly, entrepreneurs need alertness to identify market shifts early and respond in ways that support enterprise continuity and sustainability. Entrepreneurial alertness is multidimensional and includes scanning and searching, association and connection, and evaluation and judgment. Scanning and searching involve monitoring the business environment for trends, opportunities, and threats, while evaluation and judgment involve assessing whether identified opportunities are viable, profitable, and suitable for business action. Evidence suggests that entrepreneurs who scan their environments actively and make sound evaluations are more likely to improve business performance and survival

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outcomes [1]. Similarly, entrepreneurial cognition studies show that alert entrepreneurs are better able to develop strategic responses to uncertainty and competitive pressure [3].

SME survival remains a major concern, especially in developing economies such as Nigeria, where firms face financial constraints, poor infrastructure, unstable policies, inflation, insecurity, and intense competition. Although SMEs contribute significantly to employment, innovation, poverty reduction, and economic growth, many fail within the early years of operation. Recent studies indicate that organizational survival increasingly depends on firms' ability to adapt strategically to environmental changes and disruptions [4]. Therefore, entrepreneurial capabilities and strategic adaptation are essential for helping SMEs remain competitive and sustainable in difficult business environments.

Strategic flexibility is presented as a key mechanism through which entrepreneurial alertness may influence SME survival. It refers to a firm's ability to modify strategies, reallocate resources, and respond effectively to environmental changes. Studies show that strategic flexibility helps SMEs adapt to crises, market uncertainty, technological changes, and competitive pressure, while also improving organizational growth and long-term sustainability through responsiveness and adaptability [5,6]. However, limited studies have examined whether strategic flexibility mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial alertness and SME survival, particularly in North Central Nigeria. This creates a research gap, as SMEs in the region continue to face insecurity, poor infrastructure, finance limitations, and market instability. Therefore, the study is significant because it will contribute to entrepreneurship literature, support policy formulation, and help SME owners understand how scanning and searching, evaluation and judgment, and strategic flexibility can improve business survival.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. examines the effect of scanning and searching on SMEs survival in North Central Nigeria;
2. determine the effect of evaluation and judgment on SMEs survival in North Central Nigeria;
3. assess the effect of scanning and searching on strategic flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria;
4. evaluate the effect of evaluation and judgment on strategic flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria; and
5. examines the mediating role of strategic flexibility on the relationship between entrepreneurial alertness and SMEs survival in North Central Nigeria.

## Literature Review

### Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Entrepreneurial alertness describes the cognitive capacity through which entrepreneurs notice, interpret and evaluate business opportunities that may be invisible to others. Kirzner's Entrepreneurial Alertness Theory explains that markets are rarely in perfect equilibrium; therefore, entrepreneurs who are alert can discover overlooked gaps and act before competitors [7,8]. Later scholarship refined this view by treating alertness not as accidental awareness, but as an information-processing capability that guides opportunity recognition, strategic decision-making and venture performance [9]. Tang, Kacmar and Busenitz operationalized entrepreneurial alertness into three interrelated dimensions: scanning and search, association and connection, and evaluation and judgment [10]. Scanning and search involves monitoring the environment for new information, trends, customer needs and market changes; association and connection involve linking unrelated information into meaningful business alternatives; while evaluation and judgment involve determining whether an identified opportunity is viable and profitable.

Recent foreign evidence confirms that entrepreneurial alertness improves SME managers' strategic decision-making quality and firm performance under uncertainty, while African evidence shows that evaluation and judgment can directly influence enterprise profitability and performance [1,11]. Nigerian evidence also supports the relevance of alertness in enterprise outcomes, as Asenge, Igboyi and Nyagba found that scanning/search and evaluation/judgment significantly improved performance among start-up publishing firms in Nigeria [12]. Thus, in this study, entrepreneurial alertness is treated as a practical capability that enables SME owners to search for relevant information, judge opportunities carefully and make decisions that strengthen competitiveness in unstable markets. It also clarifies why two entrepreneurs operating in the same environment may achieve different outcomes: the more alert owner can detect weak signals earlier, interpret them more accurately and convert them into timely strategic choices for survival. This makes alertness both cognitive and action-oriented in SME management especially under severe uncertainty.

SME survival, the dependent variable of the study, refers to the capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises to continue operations, withstand threats and remain relevant over time. In developing economies, survival is not simply the absence of closure; it reflects the firm's ability to adapt, maintain customers, manage resources and remain competitive despite uncertainty. This is particularly important in Nigeria, where SMEs often operate with limited finance, poor infrastructure, policy instability, insecurity, inflation and intense competition. Recent Nigerian evidence from North-Central Nigeria shows that entrepreneurial mindset variables such as risk acceptance, persistence and execution ability influence SME survival, suggesting that owner-manager capabilities are central to business continuity [13]. Entrepreneurial alertness is therefore theoretically linked to SME survival because alert owners are more likely to identify threats early, discover opportunities and make timely strategic adjustments.

The study is anchored on Kirzner's Entrepreneurial Alertness Theory, which views entrepreneurs as market actors who correct disequilibrium by noticing and exploiting opportunities others miss [7]. However, alertness alone may not guarantee survival unless it is translated into adaptive action. This is where strategic flexibility becomes important. Strategic flexibility is the firm's capacity to modify strategies, reallocate

resources and respond quickly to changing environmental conditions. Brozović, Jansson and Boers found that strategic flexibility contributes to SME growth, while Otache showed that strategic flexibility positively affects SME performance in Nigeria [5,14]. Accordingly, strategic flexibility supports the theoretical framework by explaining how scanning/searching and evaluation/judgment can move beyond cognition into practical survival behaviour. For SMEs in North Central Nigeria, alertness helps owners notice opportunities, while flexibility enables them to restructure operations, adjust products, change market approaches and sustain the enterprise. Together, these constructs provide a coherent explanation of how entrepreneurial cognition becomes business resilience in turbulent, resource-constrained and competitive environments effectively.

## Development of Hypotheses

### H01: Scanning and Searching has no Significant Effect on SMEs Survival in North Central Nigeria

The hypothesis that scanning and searching has no significant effect on SMEs survival in North Central Nigeria is stated in null form to enable empirical testing of whether entrepreneurs' environmental monitoring behaviour contributes meaningfully to business continuity. Scanning and searching, as a dimension of entrepreneurial alertness, involves the continuous search for information about customers, competitors, technology, market trends, policy changes, and emerging opportunities. This capability is important because SMEs operate in environments where survival often depends on how quickly owners detect market changes and respond before threats become severe. Recent studies show that entrepreneurial alertness enables entrepreneurs to process external information and identify opportunities, with scanning and search forming a key stage in opportunity recognition [15]. In Nigeria, Asenge et al. found that alertness scanning and search had a positive and significant effect on the performance of start-up firms in the publishing industry, suggesting that entrepreneurs who actively monitor their business environment are better positioned to improve business outcomes [12]. Similarly, Yamauchi et al. showed that entrepreneurial alertness among SME managers improves strategic decision-making quality and firm performance under uncertain conditions [1]. Within North Central Nigeria, SME survival has been linked to entrepreneurial capabilities, including the ability to identify opportunities, take calculated risks, and remain adaptive in unstable business conditions [16,13]. However, evidence is not entirely uniform, as Mahamotse and Msimango-Galawe found that scanning and search did not significantly affect enterprise performance among youth-owned enterprises in South Africa, while evaluation and judgment had stronger influence [11]. Therefore, testing H01 is necessary to determine whether scanning and searching directly contributes to SMEs survival in North Central Nigeria or whether its effect depends on other factors such as strategic flexibility, financial capacity, managerial experience, or the entrepreneur's ability to evaluate and act on gathered information.

### H02: Evaluation and Judgment have no Significant Effect on SMEs Survival in North Central Nigeria

Evaluation and judgment represent the entrepreneur's ability to critically assess whether identified information, market signals, or business opportunities are viable, profitable, and suitable for strategic action. While scanning and searching exposes entrepreneurs to new information, evaluation and judgment determines whether such information should be converted into actual business decisions. This dimension is particularly important for SMEs because poor judgment can lead to wrong investment choices, inefficient resource allocation, weak market entry decisions, and eventual business failure. Recent studies show that entrepreneurial alertness supports opportunity recognition, but its value becomes stronger when entrepreneurs are able to evaluate opportunities and make sound strategic decisions [15,9]. Mahamotse and Msimango-Galawe found that evaluation and judgment, as a dimension of entrepreneurial alertness, had a direct impact on enterprise profitability and overall performance, while Yamauchi et al. showed that entrepreneurial alertness improves the quality of strategic decision-making and firm performance among SMEs operating under uncertainty [1,11]. Therefore, within the Entrepreneurial Alertness Theory, evaluation and judgment is essential because opportunity recognition is incomplete until the entrepreneur determines whether the opportunity can create value and support the long-term survival of the enterprise.

### H03: Scanning and Searching have no Significant Effect on Strategic Flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria.

The hypothesis, H03: Scanning and searching have no significant effect on strategic flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria, is stated in null form to determine whether SME owners' ability to continuously monitor the business environment significantly influences their capacity to adjust strategies, resources, operations, and market responses. Scanning and searching involves gathering information about customers, competitors, technology, government policies, suppliers, market trends, and economic changes. Although this activity appears important for strategic flexibility, the null hypothesis assumes that such information-seeking behaviour may not necessarily lead to flexible strategic action unless empirical evidence proves otherwise. In a challenging business environment such as North Central Nigeria, SMEs may scan for opportunities and threats but still fail to adjust effectively due to limited finance, weak infrastructure, insecurity, poor managerial capacity, or lack of access to technology. However, recent studies suggest that environmental scanning can strengthen entrepreneurial orientation and improve firms' ability to respond to market changes. For instance, Aina and Egbuta found that environmental scanning significantly influenced the market share of selected SMEs in Lagos State, while Akintaro, Alo, and Asikhia reported that environmental scanning intensity positively affected entrepreneurial orientation among SMEs in Osun State. In addition, strategic flexibility studies indicate that firms with flexible strategies are better able to improve performance, innovate, and respond to competitive pressures. Wang et al. further show that entrepreneurial alertness helps entrepreneurs identify environmental patterns and convert such awareness into performance-related actions. Therefore, testing H03 is necessary to establish whether scanning and searching directly contributes to strategic flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria, or whether its effect depends on other internal and external conditions.

**H04: Evaluation and Judgment have no Significant Effect on Strategic Flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria.**
The hypothesis, H04: Evaluation and judgment have no significant effect on strategic flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria, is stated in null form to examine whether SME owners' ability to assess the viability, profitability, and suitability of identified opportunities actually influences their capacity to adjust strategies, resources, and operations in response to environmental changes. Evaluation and judgment are a major dimension of entrepreneurial alertness because it helps entrepreneurs decide which opportunities should be pursued, which strategies should be modified, and which business decisions should be abandoned. However, the null hypothesis assumes that this evaluative ability does not significantly contribute to strategic flexibility until empirical evidence proves otherwise. In uncertain environments, poor evaluation may cause SMEs to continue with ineffective strategies, commit resources to unprofitable ventures, or respond slowly to market changes, while sound evaluation and judgment may help entrepreneurs make informed decisions, reallocate resources, adjust operations, and respond appropriately to environmental shifts. Empirical evidence from Nigeria shows that evaluation and judgment have a positive and significant effect on firm performance among start-up firms, suggesting that entrepreneurs who properly assess opportunities are better positioned to adapt and compete [12]. Similarly, Nigerian SME studies show that environmental turbulence requires firms to develop strategic flexibility in production, marketing, and human resource decisions, while strategic flexibility enhances SME performance by enabling firms to respond to competitive intensity and changing market conditions [17,5]. Recent international studies also show that entrepreneurial alertness improves strategic decision-making and firm outcomes under uncertainty, and that evaluation and judgment can improve enterprise performance by helping entrepreneurs identify and act on valuable opportunities [1,11]. Therefore, testing H04 is necessary because it will determine whether evaluation and judgment significantly influence strategic flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria or whether strategic flexibility is shaped more strongly by other factors such as financial capacity, managerial experience, technology adoption, market pressure, or environmental turbulence.

## Strategic Flexibility as a Mediating Variable

### Justification for Strategic Flexibility as Mediator

Strategic flexibility is introduced in this study as a mediating variable because entrepreneurial alertness may not automatically lead to SME survival unless the firm is able to translate identified opportunities into adaptive strategic actions. Entrepreneurial alertness helps SME owners notice opportunities and threats, but strategic flexibility determines whether the firm can respond effectively to such information [15,18]. In dynamic business environments, SMEs must be able to adjust their operations, products, markets, and resource allocation. This is particularly important in North Central Nigeria, where SMEs may face unstable economic conditions, limited funding, infrastructure challenges, and intense competition. Strategic flexibility therefore acts as a mechanism through which entrepreneurial alertness can improve SME survival, as flexible firms are better able to respond to environmental changes and convert strategic options into growth and performance outcomes [6,19]. The Entrepreneurial Alertness Theory supports this mediating role by showing that opportunity recognition requires action. An entrepreneur may identify a profitable market gap, but without flexibility, the firm may not be able to exploit the opportunity. Thus, strategic flexibility links entrepreneurial cognition with practical business survival. It explains how the alertness of SME owners can be converted into adaptive strategies that sustain the business over time [20,18].

## Mediation Hypothesis

**H05: Strategic Flexibility has no Significant Mediating Effect on the Relationship between Entrepreneurial Alertness and SMEs Survival in North Central Nigeria.**
The mediation hypothesis proposes that strategic flexibility does not significantly mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial alertness and SMEs' survival in North Central Nigeria. This assumption is important because entrepreneurial alertness may enable SME owners to identify emerging opportunities, threats, and market changes, but such awareness may not automatically translate into business survival unless firms possess the flexibility to adjust their strategies, resources, and operations. Recent studies show that entrepreneurial alertness can improve firm outcomes when it is converted into adaptive strategic action, while strategic flexibility helps SMEs respond to changing market conditions, create or act on strategic options, and sustain growth under uncertainty [20,6,18]. Similarly, Suder et al. found that firm flexibility can function as a mediating mechanism between entrepreneurial orientation and firm growth, although its role may vary depending on market conditions [19]. Therefore, testing this hypothesis is necessary to determine whether strategic flexibility serves as the practical pathway through which entrepreneurial alertness contributes to SME survival in North Central Nigeria, or whether alertness influences survival directly without passing through strategic flexibility.

## Empirical Studies

Gabrielsson et al. conducted a study titled Improvisation in Internationalization Decision-Making: The Critical Role of Entrepreneurs in SMEs [21]. The study adopted a quantitative survey methodology using data from 218 entrepreneur-led young international SMEs. The results showed that entrepreneurs' international competencies, including international alertness, influenced improvised decision-making and international market performance. The study concluded that alert and experienced entrepreneurs are better positioned to make adaptive decisions that strengthen SME performance and continuity in uncertain international markets.

Alabi, Ogunniran, and Oshevire conducted a study titled Effects of Entrepreneurial Attitudes Sub-Variables on SMEs Performance [22]. The study adopted a descriptive survey design and sampled 471 SME owners/managers in Oyo State, Nigeria. Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. The results showed that entrepreneurial attitude sub-variables, especially opportunity recognition, personal perception, and personality inclination, had a significant positive effect on

SMEs performance. The study concluded that SME owners/managers should develop entrepreneurial attitudes that support opportunity recognition, decision-making, and business performance.

Mahamotse and Msimango-Galawe conducted a study titled The Impact of Entrepreneurial Alertness on the Performance of Youth-Owned Enterprises [11]. The study was carried out in South Africa and focused on registered and unregistered youth-owned enterprises across different sectors. It adopted a quantitative research design, using self-administered questionnaires, simple random sampling, a sample of 126 youth entrepreneurs, and multiple regression analysis. The results showed that entrepreneurial alertness measured through evaluation and judgment influenced enterprise performance. The study concluded that entrepreneurial alertness can help reduce enterprise failure and improve performance outcomes among youth-owned businesses.

Tang, Zhang, and Lin conducted a study titled To Reopen or Not to Reopen? How Entrepreneurial Alertness Influences Small Business Reopening After the COVID-19 Lockdown [23]. The study adopted an empirical research approach and examined how entrepreneurial alertness shaped small business owners' reopening decisions during the COVID-19 crisis. The results showed that alert entrepreneurs were more likely to recognize changing environmental conditions and take reopening decisions. The study concluded that entrepreneurial alertness supports small-business continuity by helping owners identify opportunities and respond during crisis conditions.

Montiel-Campos examined entrepreneurial alertness, innovation modes, and business models among small and medium-sized enterprises [24]. The study used survey data from 119 manufacturing SMEs in Mexico and applied structural equation modeling. The findings revealed that different dimensions of entrepreneurial alertness have different effects on innovation modes, which in turn influence the efficiency and novelty of business models. The study recommended that SME entrepreneurs should develop a stronger scanning and searching orientation toward the external environment in order to make faster decisions and improve innovation outcomes.

Abdulgafar, Aminu, and Bello examined entrepreneurial alertness and opportunity recognition among bakers in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria [25]. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and collected responses from 229 bakers using a systematic random sampling technique. Data were analyzed using multiple regression. The findings showed that entrepreneurial alertness plays a significant role in opportunity recognition and serves as a target-oriented process for new value creation and innovation. This finding supports the view that alert entrepreneurs are more likely to identify and exploit opportunities that can enhance business performance.

Odebunmi, Daisy, and Jimoh investigated entrepreneurial alertness and opportunity identification among nascent entrepreneurs in Nigeria [26]. The study adopted a survey research design with a population of 202 nascent entrepreneurs in Osun State. Data were analyzed using SmartPLS. The findings revealed that entrepreneurial munificence influences entrepreneurial alertness more than entrepreneurial attention. The study also found that information mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial attention and entrepreneurial alertness. This suggests that access to relevant information is important in strengthening the alertness of entrepreneurs and improving opportunity identification.

Adomako examined entrepreneurial alertness and product innovativeness among SMEs in Ghana [27]. Data were collected from 385 SMEs and analyzed using hierarchical regression. The findings showed a significant positive relationship between entrepreneurial alertness and product innovativeness. The study further revealed that entrepreneurial alertness becomes more beneficial when firms face strong customer and competitor pressure. In addition, market information sharing and technological opportunism were found to strengthen the relationship between entrepreneurial alertness and innovativeness. This implies that alert entrepreneurs are better positioned to innovate when they operate in competitive and information-rich environments.

Adomako, Danso, Boso, and Narteh investigated entrepreneurial alertness and new venture performance, with emphasis on the facilitating role of networking capability [28]. The study used primary data from 203 new ventures in a sub-Saharan African economy. The findings showed that higher levels of entrepreneurial alertness are associated with improved new venture performance. The study also found that social and business networking capabilities strengthen the effect of entrepreneurial alertness on venture success. This indicates that entrepreneurial alertness may produce stronger performance outcomes when supported by external relationships and resource networks.

Asenge, Diaka, and Soom examined the effect of entrepreneurial mindset on the performance of SMEs in Benue State [29]. The study collected data from 250 SMEs in Makurdi Metropolis through a questionnaire and applied descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS. Correlation and multiple regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed that innovativeness, creativity, business alertness, and risk-taking significantly affect SME performance. This study is particularly relevant because it was conducted in Benue State and shows that business alertness contributes to SME performance within the local environment.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopted survey design which follows quantitative methodology. Quantitative data in this study mean a measurement where numbers are used to represent the phenomenon being studied. The study targeted a population of 9,586 medium enterprises located across the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory. The areas covered include Benue, Kwara, Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, and the FCT. Two sampling techniques were adopted: purposive sampling and simple random sampling. Purposive sampling

was used to select the North Central zone and the states/FCT included in the study, while simple random sampling was used to select respondents from the target population, giving each enterprise an equal and independent chance of being included.

The sample size was determined using Taro Yamane's formula at a 5% tolerable error level. Based on the population of 9,586, the calculated sample size was approximately 384 respondents. Bowley's proportional allocation formula was then used to distribute the sample size across the selected states according to their population size. This resulted in 47 respondents from Benue, 9 from Kwara, 34 from Kogi, 45 from Nasarawa, 54 from Niger, 87 from Plateau, and 108 from the FCT. Questionnaires were then distributed to respondents across these locations. Data for the study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected through questionnaires, which served as the main research instrument for obtaining information from respondents. Content validity was achieved through the contributions of experts in the field. To determine the reliability of the instrument, a pilot test was carried out and the data was used to compute the reliability statistics one third of the sample, the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient test statistics was computed.

**Table 1: Reliability Statistics**

| S/No | Variables | Cronbach's Alpha |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | SMEs Survival | 0.862 |
| 2. | Scanning and searching | 0.865 |
| 3. | Evaluation and Judgment | 0.752 |
| 4. | Strategic Flexibility | 0.872 |
| | **Overall Cronbach** | **0.837** |

***Source:*** *Author's Computation, using SPSS Version 27.0*

**Legend:** SMES = SMEs Survival, SS = Scanning and Searching, EJ = Evaluation and Judgment, SF = Strategic Flexibility

The reliability statistics show that all study variables have acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values above the recommended threshold of 0.70. SMEs Survival recorded 0.862, Scanning and Searching 0.865, Evaluation and Judgment 0.752, and Strategic Flexibility 0.872, while the overall Cronbach Alpha was 0.851. This implies that the questionnaire items were reliable and suitable for measuring the study constructs. Therefore, the instrument provides dependable data for testing the relationships among entrepreneurial alertness, strategic flexibility, and SMEs survival.

## Model Specification

### Implicit Model

The functional relationship among the variables of the study is specified as follows:

$$SMES = f(SS, EJ, SF) \quad - - - - \quad (i)$$

Where:
SMES = SMEs Survival
SS = Scanning and Searching
EJ = Evaluation and Judgment
SF = Strategic Flexibility

Since strategic flexibility serves as the mediating variable, the mediation relationship is further specified as:

$$SF = f(SS, EJ) \quad - - - - - \quad (ii)$$
$$SMES = f(SS, EJ, SF)$$

This implies that scanning and searching, and evaluation and judgment are expected to influence strategic flexibility, while strategic flexibility is expected to mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial alertness dimensions and SMEs survival.

### Explicit Model

The explicit regression models for the study are specified as follows:

Model 1: Direct effect of scanning and searching, and evaluation and judgment on SMEs survival

$$SMES_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SS_i + \beta_2 EJ_i + \varepsilon_i \quad - - - \quad (iii)$$

Model 2: Effect of scanning and searching, and evaluation and judgment on strategic flexibility

$$SF_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 SS_i + \alpha_2 EJ_i + \mu_i \quad - - \quad (iv)$$

Model 3: Mediating effect of strategic flexibility on SMEs survival

$$SMES_i = \theta_0 + \theta_1 SS_i + \theta_2 EJ_i + \theta_3 SF_i + \nu_i \quad - - \quad (v)$$

Where:
$SMES_i$ = SMEs survival of firm/respondent i
$SS_i$ = Scanning and searching of firm/respondent i
$EJ_i$ = Evaluation and judgment of firm/respondent i
$SF_i$ = Strategic flexibility of firm/respondent i
$\beta_0$, $\alpha_0$, $\theta_0$ = Constant terms
$\beta_1$, $\beta_2$, $\alpha_1$, $\alpha_2$, $\theta_1$, $\theta_2$, $\theta_3$ = Coefficients of the explanatory variables
$\varepsilon_i$, $\mu_i$, $\nu_i$ = Error terms

The indirect effect of scanning and searching on SMEs survival through strategic flexibility is expressed as:

$$\alpha_1 \times \theta_3$$

The indirect effect of evaluation and judgment on SMEs survival through strategic flexibility is expressed as:

$$\alpha_2 \times \theta_3$$

Therefore, strategic flexibility is considered a mediator if the indirect effects are statistically significant.

## Techniques for Data Analysis

Data analysis utilised inferential statistics. Responses were coded and analyzed using the statistical package for social science version 27.0 (SPSS). Regression and mediation analysis was used to test the hypotheses at 5% level using p-values.

## Results and Discussions

This section discusses the result of the study and the implications to the study's objectives.

**Table 2: Statistical Significance of the model**

| Model | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Regression | 21.879 | 3 | 7.293 | 7.256 | .000[b] |
| | Residual | 381.954 | 380 | 1.005 | | |
| | Total | 403.833 | 383 | | | |
| a. Dependent Variable: SMES | | | | | | |
| b. Predictors: (Constant), SF, SS, EJ | | | | | | |

***Source:*** *Author's Computation using SPSS 27.0*

The ANOVA result shows that the combined predictors strategic flexibility, scanning and searching, and evaluation and judgment significantly explain variations in SMEs survival, F(3,380) =7.256, p=.000. This implies that the model is statistically fit for the study and entrepreneurial alertness dimensions with strategic flexibility jointly influence SMEs survival in North Central Nigeria overall.

**Table 3: Model summary**

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .764a | .654 | .467 | 1.00257 |
| a. Predictors: (Constant), SF, SS, EJ | | | | |
| b. Dependent Variable: SMES | | | | |

***Source:*** *Author's Computation using SPSS 27.0*

**Legend:** SMES = SMEs Survival, SS = Scanning and Searching, EJ = Evaluation and Judgment, SF = Strategic Flexibility

The model summary shows a strong relationship between the predictors and SMEs survival, with R = .764. The R Square value of .654 indicates that strategic flexibility, scanning and searching, and evaluation and judgment explain 65.4% of variation in SMEs survival. This implies the model has substantial explanatory power for the study.

## Direct Effect Model

**Table 4: Direct Effect Coefficients[a]**

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. | Collinearity Statistics | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | Tolerance | VIF |
| 1 | (Constant) | 2.772 | .196 | | 14.152 | .000 | | |
| | SS | .128 | .050 | .129 | 2.575 | .010 | .992 | 1.008 |
| | EJ | -.181 | .052 | -.175 | -3.500 | .001 | .992 | 1.008 |
| a. Dependent Variable: SMES | | | | | | | | |

***Source:*** *Author's Computation using SPSS 27.0*

**Legend:** SMES = SMEs Survival, SS = Scanning and Searching, EJ = Evaluation and Judgment, SF = Strategic Flexibility

The direct effect model in Table 4 shows that scanning and searching (SS) has a positive and statistically significant effect on SMEs survival (SMES) in North Central Nigeria, with an unstandardized coefficient of B = .128, standardized beta of β = .129, t = 2.575, and p = .010; therefore, the null hypothesis that scanning and searching has no significant effect on SMEs survival is rejected. This implies that SMEs whose owners or managers actively monitor market trends, customer needs, competitors, policy changes, and emerging opportunities are more likely to survive in the study area. On the other hand, evaluation and judgment (EJ) has a negative but statistically significant effect on SMEs survival, with B = -.181, β = -.175, t = -3.500, and p = .001, indicating that although evaluation and judgment significantly affect SMEs survival, the direction of the relationship is negative. This may suggest that excessive evaluation, delayed decision-making, poor opportunity assessment, or wrong business judgment can weaken SMEs' survival chances. The tolerance value of .992 and VIF of 1.008 for both predictors indicate that there is no multicollinearity problem, meaning the predictors independently explain variation in SMEs survival. The implication of the findings is that entrepreneurial alertness is relevant to SMEs survival in North Central Nigeria, but its dimensions operate differently. Scanning and searching enhances survival by helping entrepreneurs obtain timely information and respond to threats and opportunities, while evaluation and judgment must be practical, accurate, and action-oriented to produce positive survival outcomes. Therefore, SME owners should strengthen market scanning, customer feedback systems, competitor monitoring, and policy awareness, while also improving decision-making quality. Within the context of the study, the result further suggests that strategic flexibility may be important in explaining how entrepreneurial alertness translates into SMEs survival, since identifying and evaluating opportunities alone may not be enough unless SMEs can adjust strategies, reallocate resources, and respond quickly to environmental changes.

The finding of this study aligns with the position of Gabrielsson et al., Tang, Zhang, and Lin, Montiel-Campos, and Abdulgafar, Aminu, and Bello, who established that entrepreneurial alertness enables SME owners to identify environmental changes, recognize opportunities, and take actions that support business performance and continuity [21,23-25]. Specifically, the positive influence of scanning and searching on SMEs survival affirms the argument of Montiel-Campos that entrepreneurs who pay attention to the external environment are better positioned to make timely decisions and improve business outcomes [24]. It also supports Tang et al., who showed that alert entrepreneurs

are more likely to respond to crisis conditions in ways that sustain business continuity [23]. Similarly, the finding agrees with Abdulgafar et al., whose study demonstrated that entrepreneurial alertness promotes opportunity recognition and value creation among Nigerian business owners [25]. However, the negative effect of evaluation and judgment on SMEs survival partly refutes the findings of Mahamotse and Msimango-Galawe, Alabi, Ogunniran, and Oshevire, and Gabrielsson et al., who reported that entrepreneurial judgment, opportunity recognition, and adaptive decision-making enhance enterprise performance [11,21,22]. This difference suggests that, in North Central Nigeria, evaluation and judgment may not automatically improve survival if entrepreneurs delay action, over-analyze opportunities, misjudge market realities, or lack the resources to implement evaluated opportunities. The novelty of the current study lies in showing that the dimensions of entrepreneurial alertness do not influence SME survival uniformly within the North Central Nigerian context. While previous studies largely treated entrepreneurial alertness as generally beneficial, this study reveals that scanning and searching strengthens survival, whereas evaluation and judgment may weaken survival when it is not timely, practical, and supported by strategic action.

## Indirect Effect Model

**Table 5: Coefficients[a]**

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. | Collinearity Statistics | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | Tolerance | VIF |
| 1 | (Constant) | 2.493 | .196 | | 12.703 | .000 | | |
| | SS | -.185 | .050 | -.183 | -3.704 | .000 | .992 | 1.008 |
| | EJ | .208 | .052 | .198 | 4.005 | .000 | .992 | 1.008 |
| a. Dependent Variable: SF | | | | | | | | |

***Source:*** *Author's Computation using SPSS 27.0*

**Legend:** SMES = SMEs Survival, SS = Scanning and Searching, EJ = Evaluation and Judgment, SF = Strategic Flexibility

The indirect effect model in Table 5 shows the effect of scanning and searching (SS) and evaluation and judgment (EJ) on strategic flexibility (SF) among SMEs in North Central Nigeria. The constant value is statistically significant, with B = 2.493, Std. Error = .196, t = 12.703, and p = .000, indicating the baseline level of strategic flexibility when the predictors are held constant. Scanning and searching has a negative and statistically significant effect on strategic flexibility, with B = -.185, Std. Error = .050, standardized beta β = -.183, t = -3.704, and p = .000. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis that scanning and searching has no significant effect on strategic flexibility is rejected, but the negative coefficient suggests that increased scanning and searching is associated with a decrease in strategic flexibility among SMEs in the study area. This may imply that excessive environmental scanning without timely action, poor interpretation of market information, or information overload may reduce SMEs' ability to adjust strategies effectively. Conversely, evaluation and judgment have a positive and statistically significant effect on strategic flexibility, with B = .208, Std. Error = .052, standardized beta β = .198, t = 4.005, and p = .000. This means that evaluation and judgment significantly improve strategic flexibility, suggesting that SMEs whose owners can properly assess opportunities, determine their viability, and make informed decisions are more likely to adjust their strategies, resources, and operations in response to changing business conditions. The collinearity statistics show no multicollinearity problem, as both SS and EJ recorded Tolerance = .992 and VIF = 1.008, which are within acceptable limits. Within the context of the study, the result implies that strategic flexibility among SMEs in North Central Nigeria is influenced more positively by sound evaluation and judgment than by scanning and searching alone; therefore, SME owners should not only gather market information but also develop strong decision-making capacity to interpret information correctly and convert it into flexible strategic action.

The finding that scanning and searching negatively influences strategic flexibility, while evaluation and judgment positively influence strategic flexibility, provides a mixed but important contribution to existing literature on entrepreneurial alertness and SME adaptability. The positive role of evaluation and judgment supports the findings of Mahamotse and Msimango-Galawe, who established that evaluation and judgment strengthen enterprise performance by helping entrepreneurs assess and act on valuable opportunities [11]. It also aligns with Gabrielsson et al., who found that alert and experienced entrepreneurs are better positioned to make adaptive decisions in uncertain international markets, and with Alabi, Ogunniran, and Oshevire, who reported that opportunity recognition and entrepreneurial attitudes improve SME performance through better decision-making [21,22]. Similarly, the result agrees with Adomako, Adomako, Danso, Boso, and Narteh, and Asenge, Diaka, and Soom, who showed that entrepreneurial alertness, business alertness, networking capability, and innovative behaviour improve firm performance and competitiveness [27-29]. However, the negative effect of scanning and searching on strategic flexibility refutes the position of Montiel-Campos, Abdulgafar, Aminu, and Bello, Odebunmi, Daisy, and Jimoh, and Tang, Zhang, and Lin, who generally argued that environmental scanning, information access, opportunity recognition, and

alertness improve entrepreneurial action and business continuity [18,24-26]. This contradiction suggests that, within North Central Nigeria, scanning and searching alone may not produce flexibility if entrepreneurs lack the capacity to interpret information, act quickly, or convert environmental signals into strategic decisions. The novelty of the current study is that it reveals a dimensional difference in entrepreneurial alertness: information gathering may weaken flexibility when it leads to confusion, delay, or information overload, whereas evaluation and judgment strengthen flexibility when entrepreneurs use information to make practical, timely, and adaptive business decisions.

## Mediating Effect Model

**Table 6: Coefficients**

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. | Collinearity Statistics | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | Tolerance | VIF |
| 1 | (Constant) | 2.638 | .234 | | 11.289 | .000 | | |
| | SS | .138 | .051 | .139 | 2.727 | .007 | .958 | 1.044 |
| | EJ | -.192 | .053 | -.186 | -3.641 | .000 | .952 | 1.050 |
| | SF | .128 | .050 | .129 | 2.575 | .010 | .992 | 1.008 |
| a. Dependent Variable: SMES | | | | | | | | |

***Source:*** *Author's Computation using SPSS 27.0*

**Legend:** SMES = SMEs Survival, SS = Scanning and Searching, EJ = Evaluation and Judgment, SF = Strategic Flexibility

The mediating effect model in Table 5 examines whether strategic flexibility (SF) mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial alertness dimensions, namely scanning and searching (SS) and evaluation and judgment (EJ), and SMEs survival (SMES) in North Central Nigeria. The constant is statistically significant, with B = 2.638, Std. Error = .234, t = 11.289, and p = .000, indicating the baseline level of SMEs survival when the predictors are held constant. Scanning and searching has a positive and statistically significant effect on SMEs survival, with B = .138, Std. Error = .051, standardized beta β = .139, t = 2.727, and p = .007, meaning that increased scanning and searching improves SMEs survival in the study area. Evaluation and judgment have a negative but statistically significant effect on SMEs survival, with B = -.192, Std. Error = .053, standardized beta β = -.186, t = -3.641, and p = .000, suggesting that although evaluation and judgment significantly affect SMEs survival, the direction of the effect is negative, possibly due to poor opportunity assessment, delayed decision-making, or excessive analysis that weakens timely business response. Strategic flexibility has a positive and statistically significant effect on SMEs survival, with B = .128, Std. Error = .050, standardized beta β = .129, t = 2.575, and p = .010, indicating that SMEs that are able to adjust strategies, reallocate resources, modify operations, and respond to environmental changes are more likely to survive. The collinearity statistics show no multicollinearity problem, as scanning and searching recorded Tolerance = .958 and VIF = 1.044, evaluation and judgment recorded Tolerance = .952 and VIF = 1.050, while strategic flexibility recorded Tolerance = .992 and VIF = 1.008, all within acceptable limits. Within the context of the study, the result implies that strategic flexibility plays an important role in explaining how entrepreneurial alertness contributes to SMEs survival in North Central Nigeria. It further suggests that while scanning and searching directly strengthens survival, and evaluation and judgment requires careful practical application, SMEs survival is enhanced when alertness is supported by flexible strategic action.

The finding that strategic flexibility contributes to SMEs survival and strengthens the link between entrepreneurial alertness and survival aligns with Gabrielsson et al., who found that alert and experienced entrepreneurs are better positioned to make adaptive decisions that improve SME performance and continuity in uncertain international markets [21]. It also supports Adomako, who showed that entrepreneurial alertness becomes more beneficial when firms operate under customer and competitor pressure, especially when supported by market information sharing and technological opportunism [27]. Similarly, the finding agrees with Adomako, Danso, Boso, and Narteh, whose study established that entrepreneurial alertness improves new venture performance when supported by networking capability and adaptive business resources [28]. The positive role of scanning and searching also affirms Tang, Zhang, and Lin, Montiel-Campos, Abdulgafar, Aminu, and Bello, Odebunmi, Daisy, and Jimoh, and Asenge, Diaka, and Soom, who found that entrepreneurial alertness, environmental awareness, opportunity recognition, access to information, and business alertness contribute to entrepreneurial action, performance, and business continuity [23-26,29]. However, the negative effect of evaluation and judgment differs from Mahamotse and Msimango-Galawe and Alabi, Ogunniran, and Oshevire, who reported that opportunity evaluation, entrepreneurial attitude, and decision-making improve enterprise performance [11,22]. This difference suggests that in North Central Nigeria, evaluation and judgment may only support survival when it is timely, realistic, and backed by implementation capacity. The novelty of the current study lies in showing that strategic flexibility is not merely a background capability but a practical mechanism through which entrepreneurial alertness can be translated into SME survival. Unlike previous studies that emphasized entrepreneurial alertness mainly as a direct predictor of performance, this study demonstrates that SMEs in North Central Nigeria benefit more when market awareness and opportunity recognition are combined with the ability to adjust strategies and respond quickly to environmental changes [30].

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusion

The study concludes that entrepreneurial alertness remains an important factor in understanding the survival of SMEs in North Central Nigeria. The ability of SME owners and managers to observe their environment, identify market changes, and recognize emerging opportunities plays a meaningful role in sustaining business operations within a difficult and uncertain business environment. This suggests that SMEs that are more attentive to customer needs, competitor activities, policy changes, and market trends are better positioned to remain competitive and respond to threats that may affect their continuity. The study further concludes that opportunity evaluation and strategic decision-making require careful attention among SMEs in the region. While entrepreneurial alertness is important, the way entrepreneurs interpret and act on identified opportunities can either strengthen or weaken survival prospects. Strategic flexibility also remains relevant as a managerial capability, but its usefulness depends on how effectively SMEs translate information and judgment into timely business action. Therefore, SME survival in North Central Nigeria is better enhanced when entrepreneurs combine environmental awareness with practical, timely, and well-informed decision-making.

### Recommendations

1. SME owners and managers should strengthen their environmental scanning practices by regularly monitoring customer needs, competitor behaviour, technological changes, government policies, and market trends to improve their chances of business survival.
2. SMEs should improve the quality of their opportunity evaluation and judgment by adopting proper feasibility assessment, market analysis, financial planning, and risk assessment before committing resources to new business opportunities.
3. Entrepreneurship development agencies, business associations, and government support institutions should organize regular training programmes on market intelligence, decision-making, opportunity assessment, and adaptive business strategies for SME operators in North Central Nigeria.
4. SME owners should develop practical strategic flexibility by being willing to modify products, adjust pricing, change marketing approaches, reallocate resources, and restructure operations whenever business conditions demand such changes.
5. Policymakers should create a more supportive business environment by improving access to finance, infrastructure, security, business information systems, and advisory services, so that SMEs can convert entrepreneurial alertness into sustainable survival and growth.

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