

Entrepreneurial passion and professionalism on the success of SMEs in Plateau State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the mediating influence of professionalism on the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and success in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria.

Research Methodology: Data were collected from a sample size of 288 SMEs owners in Jos South LGA of Plateau State out of a total population of 1026 SME owners and were analyzed using PLS-SEM version 3.0.

Results: The results of the direct relationships revealed a significant positive relationship between the variables HO1 ($\beta = 0.831$, $t_{stat} = 20.447$, and $p\text{-value} = 0.000$), HO2 ($\beta = 0.882$, $t\text{-stat} = 51.325$, and $p\text{-value} = 0.000$), and HO3 ($\beta = 0.168$, $t\text{-stat} = 3.822$, and $p\text{-value} = 0.000$). Mediation analysis revealed that EP and ES were mediated by professionalism (HO4, $t\text{-stat} = 3.817$, $p = 0.000$).

Limitations: This study was limited to EP, ES, and professionalism, and was analyzed using PLS-SEM version 3.0.

Contributions: This paper provides useful insights for aspiring entrepreneurs, managers, policy makers, corporate businesses, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations around the world to facilitate business success using passion and professionalism.

Originality/Value: This study adds to the corpus of information on professionalism in entrepreneurship and small business literature in Africa, which academics in developing countries generally overlook.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial passion, professionalism, entrepreneurial success, SME's

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1. Introduction

Global economic system is built on the foundation of courageous entrepreneurs with a high capacity to discover, create, and exploit hidden opportunities that most people are unaware of, into successful solution-driven systems, products and services that address basic societal needs (Iyortsuun, Nmadu, Dakung, & Gajere, 2019). These courageous entrepreneurs must be successful in their entrepreneurial endeavors to address societal problems because they are successful in inventing, founding, and developing a business, product, or service that meets the needs and expectations of society. For instance, Dangote and Mark Zuckerberg are examples of successful entrepreneurs who have helped solve many societal problems through their business products and services.

The factors that drive this individual to achieve entrepreneurial success have been a subject of debate in entrepreneurship research worldwide. Scholars and researchers across the world have identified entrepreneurial success factors such as passion (Cardon, Glauser, & Murnieks, 2017; Iyortsuun et al., 2019; Kusa & Nson, 2023), entrepreneurial competencies (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020). But yet the problem of business failure continually persists, as many businesses still fail within it first 5 years of operations (Ademola, Olaleye, Olusuyi, & Edun, 2013). This persistent business failure has led to the search for

other factors that explain business success, thus leading to the identification of the concept of 'professionalism' as an important key factor for entrepreneurial success in today's dynamic complex environment.

Research has suggested the importance of professionalism in explaining entrepreneurial success (Popova, 2006). However, research on the mediating role of professionalism between entrepreneurial passion and success is in its infancy.

According to Despotidou and Prastacos (2012), professionalism entails expert knowledge and dedication to a broader view than self-interest within an overall ethical behavior". The generalized nature of the definition proposed by Despotidou and Prastacos (2012) influenced the use of 'professionalism' as a mediating variable in the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success.

This entrepreneurial failure in light of these entrepreneurial success factors and consistent findings as evidenced in the literature review influenced the decision to undertake this study to address this research gap by introducing a mediating variable (professionalism) to understand why a consistent positive relationship exists between entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success. Therefore, the major objective of this study is to synthesize the evidence in the literature and the field on why consistent positive relationships exist by introducing the concept of professionalism as a mediator in entrepreneurial success based on theory and empirical evidence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 The concept of Entrepreneurial Passion

Passion is a powerful force with the ability to create and bring happiness and promote progress (Xiaoqiang, 2024). Stenholm and Nielsen (2019) define passion as something derived from competencies. Thus, according to Murnieks et al. (2014), passion is a strong inclination toward certain activities that energize motivation and inspires individuals to persist through the trials and tribulations associated with accomplishing difficult tasks. Fesharaki (2019) defined passion as a powerful tendency toward a specific activity that a person deems important and spends time on. Schulte-Holthaus and Kuckertz (2024) described passion in terms of the human capacity through which a person can develop his talents and effectively translate it into entrepreneurship.

The concept of entrepreneurial passion has therefore been conceptualized according to Kusa and Nson (2023) as a positive inner force directed towards entrepreneurial activities that are legally and ethically related with meaningful and salient roles to the entrepreneur's self-identity. It is a superordinate construct consisting of an intense positive feeling directed at entrepreneurial activities associated with specific roles that are meaningful and salient to the self-identity of the entrepreneur's characteristics (Iyortsuun et al., 2019). It is a strong inclination towards enjoyable and important activities related to being an entrepreneur (Murnieks et al., 2011). Passion is important in entrepreneurial success, Steve Jobs said that "passionate people can change the world" (Vallerand & Paquette, 2024). Thus, "a world devoid of passion is like a barren desert; a life without passion is like a stagnant water" (Xiaoqiang, 2024).

Fesharaki (2019) defined entrepreneurial passion as intense positive emotions that are achieved consciously and stimulated via participation in activities related to entrepreneurial role and identity. It's a strong motivational source that simulates the thoughts, actions and persistence in entrepreneurial activities. He operationalized entrepreneurial passion into passion for inventing, passion for founding, and passion for developing.

entrepreneurial passion (Biraglia & Kadile, 2017; Cardon & Kirk, 2015; Fesharaki, 2019; Kusa & Nson, 2023; Newman, Obschonka, Moeller, & Chandan, 2021; Stenholm & Nielsen, 2019), they dimension;

Passion for inventing: According to Cardon, Wincent, Singh, and Drnovsek (2009), passion for inventing refers to the discovery and creation of new opportunities and proposing innovative methods to exploit them.

Thus, an entrepreneur has a high passion for inventing, exploiting, and developing business opportunities. Assessing the environment with the intent of recognizing and developing new opportunities, designing and inventing new products and services, and working on new prototypes to meet certain demands. Some entrepreneurs explore entrepreneurial ideas deeper than others and seek new answers to market needs and demands; hence, some entrepreneurs design and create more inventions, products, and services than their counterparts.

For instance, Nikola Tesla (alternating current (AC), wireless communication, and many other inventions) and Steve Jobs (Apple Macintosh, iPod, and iPhone) are all known for their intense devotion to finding and developing new products or services and exploring their commercial application.

Passion for founding: Providing new financial, human, and social resources to establish a new venture. These entrepreneurs have a high passion for establishing and birthing a firm (Kusa and Nson, 2023).

Founder entrepreneurs perfectly fit the characteristics of entrepreneurs with a high tendency to create new companies, thus having high levels of passion for establishing a venture (Biraglia & Kadile, 2017; Fesharaki, 2019).

Passion for developing: Passion for developing simply refers to entrepreneurs who derive pleasure from growing and developing a business after it has been founded (Kusa & Nson, 2023). The majority of entrepreneurs who enjoy developing an existing organization more than establishing a new one are afraid of bankruptcy that comes with a start-up business.

A number of these kinds of entrepreneurs according to Fesharaki (2019) are mainly called "organizational entrepreneurs" or "intrapreneurs," who enjoy business activities such as sales and extensive marketing campaigns, recruitment and training new employees and attracting investors to extend their current business (Cardon et al., 2009).

Developers entrepreneurs fit well in the description of entrepreneurs who have a high passion for developing new markets and growing and expanding the size of their businesses. Thus, they have a high passion for developing and growing a business after founding. These entrepreneurs do so by developing new products and services for their existing ones. Most entrepreneurs are not easily motivated by founding a firm, but their high motivation comes from growing and expanding the firm.

The strategies used here are somewhat different from those of inventor founders, as most strategies here aim at expansion. The Nigerian banking industry is a good example of this type of intrapreneur, where the founder and Visioneer are different from the managers and operators of the business.

2.1.2 The Concept of Professionalism

Professionalism is defined as the ability, expertise, and professional commitment in carrying out duties (Nadhifa, Haliah, & Nirwana, 2024). Professionalism is that which, by its existence, contributes in an important way to human good, thus contributing something worthwhile to society (Blackburn and McGhee 2004). Theoretically, the aim of a business is directed towards the empowerment, autonomy, and transformation of people for the good of the individual and society. Blackburn and McGhee's definition of professionalism conceptualized it by referring to virtues that contribute to those goals and, therefore, to human empowerment. This definition is within the ambit of what Justice Louis Brandeis stipulated as the three characteristics of a profession: intellectual training involving knowledge as opposed to mere skill; pursuing an occupation largely for others and not merely for oneself; and measuring success other than on financial return.

Professionalism relates to the quality of conduct and character of a person that accompanies the use of superior knowledge, skill, and judgment to the benefit of another, prior to any consideration of self-interest (Naidoo, 2016), which results in doing the best job. The concept of professionalism is composed of the possession of a systematic body of knowledge, commitment to a good broader interest than self-interest, and the overall ethical character of the activity and ethical conduct (Despotidou & Prastacos, 2012). Thus, expert knowledge, dedication to a broader than self-interest, and ethical behavior make up the definition of professionalism.

Thus, it is seen that the various definitions of the concept of professionalism from different authors are anchored on three pillars: expert knowledge, expectation of both internal and external stakeholders, otherwise known as the broader good or welfare of society, and ethical conduct of behavior.

2.1.3 The Concept of Entrepreneurial Success

However, there is no accepted definition of success. Success is a subjective term that depends on what a person or organization wants to achieve. For some, it means amassing money or showing off an achievement that is celebrated with a fancy purchase of exotic cars on social media. Others may view it as earning a university degree or building a great family. However, the concept of success as a subjective term is far greater. Some scholars have defined success as the progressive realization of a worthy ideal (Nightingale, 2013). N. C. Anderson, Conn, Gamas, Borkhuis, and Lantto (2018) in their work defined success as the progressive realization of a contribution toward the enhancement of oneself or others by doing something one is good at and has the desire to do.

What is important to keep in mind (Mongia, 2013) is that success is often evaluated individually and subjectively; hence, it is harder to find common grounds to evaluate success when dealing with entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial activities. A desired ideal or goal is a key element to consider when interpreting whether a person is successful or not. Without a desired ideal, goal, objective, or aim, it would be difficult to ascertain the extent to which a person is successful. Hence, we adopt the definitions of kusa and Nson (2023), who defined success as the "worthy achievement of set goals and objectives in a stipulated timeframe."

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1. Planned behavior theory

The theory of Planned behavior states that the best way to predict and explain a person's behavior is through that person's behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1980). Planned behavior theory assumes that (1) people behave rationally and systematically, making use of information available to them when they decide to act or not to act, (2) people's actions are guided by conscious motives, and (3) people's actions and their implications are consciously considered before they decide to act or not to act (Ajzen, 1980). Hence, based on these assumptions, the theory was originally called the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1980; Suganda & Aprianingsih, 2024), in which a person's attitude and subjective norms influence his behavioral intentions. A person's behavioral intentions influence their behavior.

Attitude refers to a person's favorable or unfavorable appraisal of their behavior. Subjective norm refers to the perceived social pressure from other individuals to perform or not perform a behavior. Intention refers to the motivational factors that influence a person's behavior. Intentions indicate how willing a person is to attempt a behavior and how much effort he is likely to exert toward that behavior. In general, the stronger the intention to perform a behavior, the more likely the individual is to perform that behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

The intentions of a person might be to become entrepreneurs, fuel with the passion to invent, establish, or develop a business with subjective norms as a result of the social pressure from the environment to perform, arms with motivational factors such as government grants like the (social investment programs, N-power, sure-p, Nirsal microfinance loan, graduate empowerment loan and grant, etc.) and non-governmental grants like Tony Elumelu foundation, ITF empowerment programmes, amongst others. This and more are programs that inculcate the necessary attitudes and behaviors that encourage

people to be entrepreneurially inclined. Thus, anchoring on the theoretical framework of planned behavior theory, we advance our argument that entrepreneurial passion mediated by professionalism translates to the entrepreneurial success of businesses in Jos South of Plateau State, Nigeria.

To model the prediction of behavioral intentions and behavior, theory has been widely used by scholars (Shareef, Kumar, Kumar, & Hasin, 2013). Research also found that "perceived behavioral control (PBC)" which is an important variable was missing from the theory of reasoned action, (Bandura, Adams, Hardy, & Howells, 1980) thereby provided empirical evidences to show that a person's behavior is strongly influenced by the person's level of self-confidence. That is, 'the person's "self-perception" is that he or she has the ability to perform a behavior. Hence, it is based on research findings that PBC was incorporated into the theory of reasoned action, thus making it the "perceived behavioral control (PBC)" was incorporated in to the theory of reasoned action, thus making it the "theory of planned behavior" (Ajzen, 2020).

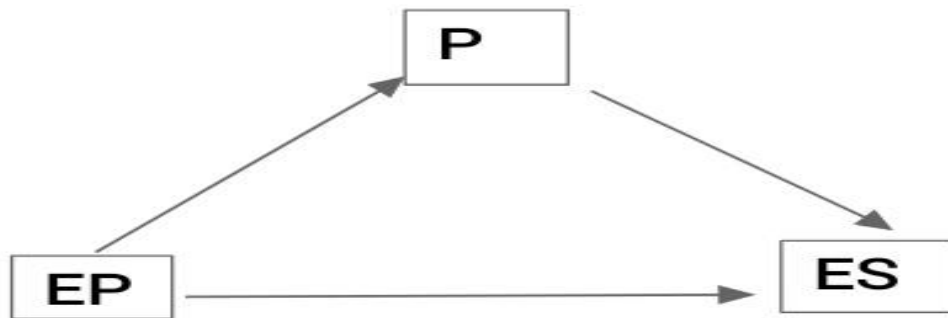
Planned behavior is a theory that explains that behavioral intention can be expressed as a behavior only if that behavior is under the perceived control of the individual, meaning that the person perceives himself as having complete control over deciding to perform that behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, the passion for inventing, finding, and developing a business is solely under the control of such an individual. The behavior of SMEs owners to invent, find, and develop a business, product, or service is solely under the entrepreneur's control.

It is this passion that drives entrepreneurs to succeed in their endeavors, just as research findings from scholars have proven that both behavioral intentions and perceived behavioral control directly predict the performance of a behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2001). Ajzen and Madden (1986) in their work who first test the theory of planned behavior in their findings have shown that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) influence behavioral intention, which then influences performance of behavior. Therefore, the attitude, subjective norm, and PBC of SMEs owners and many other entrepreneurs influence their behavioral intentions to invent, find, and develop a business brand. This intention drives an individual to want to learn more about such an activity, which eventually leads to professionalism in such an area of business. Although there is a mixed reaction regarding the direct influences of PBC on behavior, as some indicate direct influences, others also indicate indirect influences of PBC on behavior via intentions. The fact is that there is an influence of PBC on behavior, just as Ajzen and Madden (1986) reported the direct influence of PBC on behavior with low-level perceptions of control but also found an indirect influence of PBC on behavior with high-level perceptions of control. The best way to explain or predict a person's behavior is to look at his or her intention to behave.

Three kinds of thoughts tend to influence people's behavior: (1) beliefs about the likely consequences of their behavior, (2) beliefs about the normative expectations of other people, and (3) beliefs about things that might help or hurt performance of the behavior (such as resources, opportunities, skills, knowledge, abilities, equipment, information, money, time, and cooperation among others things) that increase feelings of control or lack of control over being able to perform the behavior. These three kinds of thoughts are what makes a person's intention to perform a behavior, in which this intention in turn influences whether the person actually performs the behavior. From the explanation above, the theory of planned behavior underpins the study of entrepreneurial passion and professionalism in achieving entrepreneurial success.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework of this study. This explains the direct and indirect relationship between entrepreneurial passion (EP), professionalism (P) and entrepreneurial success (ES) supported by Ajzen & Fishbein's (1980) theory of planned behavior



Source: Authors Model (2024)

2.3 Empirical Review

2.3.1 Entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success

In a study conducted by Dias, Hallak, and Patuleia (2024), they submitted that entrepreneurial passion is a ‘necessary condition’ for achieving social innovation outcome in the context of tourism entrepreneurs. In a study conducted in Turkey, Dinibutun (2024) revealed a significant positive relationship between entrepreneurial passion and business model innovation, and fostering entrepreneurial passion is crucial to the growth of new SMEs. Dinibutun (2024) concluded that entrepreneurial passion helps business owners recognize new opportunities and develop their skills, thereby encouraging entrepreneurship.

Envick (2014) carried out a study on "Achieving Entrepreneurship Success through Passion, vision & courage: A Cognitive Model for Developing Entrepreneurial Intelligence". This study furthers the notion that cognitive processing and framework are viable ways to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors to achieve success. The study concludes that passion, vision, and courage are positively related to entrepreneurial success.

Chen, Zhang, Tian, and Bu (2022) in their study based on identity theory revealed that entrepreneurial passion relates to entrepreneurial success. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H01: Entrepreneurial passion does not lead to the entrepreneurial success of SMEs in Plateau State.

2.3.2 Entrepreneurial passion and professionalism

Cardon, Glauser, and Murnieks (2017) carried out a study on "Passion for what? Expanding the domains of entrepreneurial passion." Their study revealed that entrepreneurial passion helps coordinate the cognition and behavior of entrepreneurs, thereby providing a fire that fuels innovation, persistence, and ultimate success. Their discovery process revealed six major sources of entrepreneurial passion in no particular order: passion for people, passion for growth, passion for competition, passion for inventing, passion for the product or service, and passion for a social cause. Their study extends prior research that focuses on passion for a more limited range of activities. Hence, the need for this hypothesis is as follows.

H02: Entrepreneurial passion does not lead to the professionalism of SME owners in Plateau State

2.3.3 Professionalism and entrepreneurial success

Porcupile (2015), in his work on "What is Professionalism? What does professionalism mean to you?". In his study, he first defined professionalism as encompassing a set of different attributes: specialized knowledge, competence, honesty and integrity, accountability, self-regulation, and image. In his work, he submitted that it was essential to be a professional if you wanted to succeed. Therefore, entrepreneurs need to be professional to succeed in today's environment.

L. E. Anderson and Bolt (2013) in his work on "Professionalism: skills for workplace success". They explained that professionalism is one of the biggest factors affecting career success. Professionalism leads to workplace success, strong professional reputation, and a high level of work ethics and excellence. Professionalism is someone's inherent ability to do what is expected of them and deliver

quality work, because they are driven to do so. Professional entrepreneurs have the inherent ability to do what they expect and deliver quality work because they are driven to do so. This results in the following hypothesis.

H03: Professionalism does not lead to the entrepreneurial success of SMEs in Plateau State

2.3.4 Entrepreneurial Passion, Professionalism and Entrepreneurial Success

Findings from the literature review revealed a consistent positive relationship between entrepreneurial passion and business concepts such as performance and success (e.g., (Cardon et al., 2017; Dias et al., 2024; Dinibutun, 2024; Fesharaki, 2019; Pepple & Enuoh, 2020; Stenholm & Nielsen, 2019)). Hence, it is necessary to determine the reasons for this consistent positive relationship. To do this, the concept of professionalism was introduced to mediate between entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success.

However, by reviewing relevant literature, it becomes clear that there is a dearth of empirical evidence on the mediating role of professionalism in the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success. Only a few studies have investigated the direct relationship between entrepreneurial passion and success (. C. Anderson et al., 2018; Cardon et al., 2017; Envick, 2014). This is the reason scholars called for more studies on entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success (Murnieks et al., 2011; Newman, Obschonka, Moeller, & Chandan, 2021; Stenholm & Nielsen, 2019). Hence, there is a need for more research on the mediating role of professionalism in entrepreneurial passion in entrepreneurial success. In line with this, the following hypothesis was proposed in the null form:

H04: Professionalism does not mediate the impact of entrepreneurial passion on entrepreneurial success of SMEs in Plateau State

3. Research Methodology

This study used a descriptive design. The context of the study is Plateau State, Nigeria, while the unit of analysis is small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs), which consist of a total population of 1026 SMEs in the Jos South LGA of Plateau State. Using Taro Yamane's formula (Yamane, 1973), the calculated sample size was Two Hundred and Eighty-Eight (288). Data for the study were collected, coded, and presented using tables, frequencies, and percentages. Data analysis was performed using the Partial Least Square Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM) version 3.0.

4. Results and discussions

PLS-SEM version 3.0 was employed to examine the relationship between entrepreneurial passion, professionalism, and success of SMEs in Plateau State. A total of 288 questionnaires were distributed, and 241 valid questionnaires were returned and analyzed. The returned questionnaires constitute approximately 83.6% hence valid for the study.

Table 1. Distribution of Biographical Data of the Respondents

Demographic variable		Frequency	%
Gender	M	107	45.00
	F	131	55.00
Age	Below 30yrs	80	33.61
	30-50years	83	34.87
	51 years above	75	31.51
Educational Qual.	FSLT/SSCE	112	47.06
	DIPLOMA/NCE	95	39.92
	HND/DEGREE	23	9.66
	POSTGRADUATE	8	3.36

Source: Field Survey (2023)

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of respondents' demographic data. There were 107 male (45%) and 131 female (55%) respondents.

The age distribution revealed that 80(33.61%) respondents were below the age of 29 years, 83(34.87%) were between the ages of 30 and 50 years, and 75(31.51%) were above 51 years. Educational qualifications of respondents showed that 112(47.06%) were FSLT and SSCE holders, 95(39.92%) were diploma and NCE holders, 23(9.66%) were HND/DEGREE holders, and eight (3.36%) were POSTGRADUATE holders.

Measurement Model Analysis

Before performing the estimations, the reliability and validity of the adapted measurement scales were assessed. Construct and composite reliability were measured using α (Brown, 2002). As indicated in Table 2, the values of α and the composite reliability were greater than the threshold value of 0.70, as suggested by Louangrath (2018). Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted (AVE) values shown in Table 6; all the values were acceptable for the entire model following the commonly used threshold value of 0.5 (Henseler, Hubona, & Ray, 2016). This study also checked for multicollinearity, as suggested by Aiken, West, and Reno (1991). Thus, all the measurement constructs' VIF values were satisfactory and below the threshold.

Table 2. Construct reliability and Validity

Constructs	Items	Cronbach Alpa	CR	AVE
ENT. PASSION	9	0.914	0.958	0.693
PROFESSIONALISM	9	0.861	0.869	0.787
ENT. SUCCESS	3	0.917	0.924	0.596

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was also measured using both criteria of the Fornell Larcker and Hetero-trait and Mono-trait ratio (HTMT). Both criteria are widely accepted and have been used by previous researchers (Henseler et al., 2016; Neneh, 2022). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the criteria square root of the AVE is called discriminant validity, and the values of the correlations are below the output of discriminant validity. Hence, all the measurement constructs met the criteria for discriminant validity. The values of discriminant validity are shown in Tables 3 and 5.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Fonell Lacker Craterion

	ENT. PASSION	ENT SUCCESS	PROFESSIONALISM
ENT. PASSION	0.832		
ENT. SUCCESS	0.979	0.887	
PROFESSIONALISM	0.882	0.901	0.772

Table 4. Discriminant Validity Heterotriat Monotriat Ratio (Htmt) Ratio

	ENT. PASSION	ENT SUCCESS	PROFESSIONALISM
ENT. PASSION			
ENT. SUCCESS	1.083		
PROFESSIONALISM	0.920	0.987	

Table 5. R-Square

	R-square	R-square Adjusted
ENT SUSSESS	0.964	0.964
PROFESIONALISM	0.778	0.778

Table 6. F-Square

	ENT PASSION	ENT SUCCESS	PROFESSIONALISMM
ENT PASSION		4.286	3.511
ENT SUSSESS			

Structural Model Analysis

The structural model was assessed using Smart-PLS software with a PLS algorithm. Model fitness was evaluated using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value, as suggested by Henseler et al. (2016), with a good SRMR value of <0.08 . Therefore, the value of SRMR for the proposed model is 0.06, which shows the overall fitness of the model. Furthermore, Figure 2 shows the values of R^2 , which explained 77.8% of the variance in professionalism and 96.4% of the variance in entrepreneurial success.

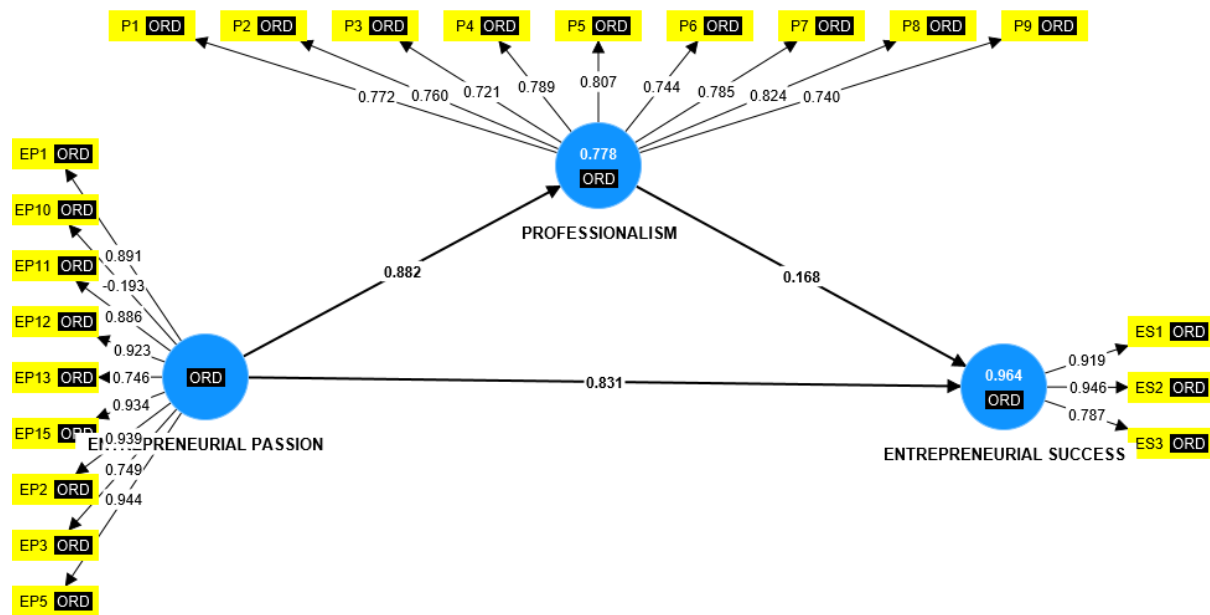


Figure 2. Structural Model After Removing Low Factor Loading

Table 7: Colliniarity Statistics Vif Inner Mode

	ENT PASSION	ENT SUCCESS	PROFESIONALISMM
ENT PASSION		4.511	1.000
ENT SUSSESS			
PROFESIONALISM		4.511	

4.1 Hypotheses Testing

Direct effects

Table 8. Path analysis (direct effects)

Hypotheses	Relationships	STANDARDI ZED PATH	T. Values	P. Values	Accepted/Rejected
HO ₁	EP->ES	0.831	20.447	0.000	Reject null hypo.
HO ₂	EP -> P	0.882	51.325	0.000	Reject null hypo.
HO ₃	P-> ES	0.168	3.822	0.000	Reject null hypo.

The results of the direct relationships revealed a significant positive relationship between the variables HO₁ ($\beta = 0.831$, $t_{stat} = 20.447$, and $p\text{-value} = 0.000$), HO₂ ($\beta = 0.882$, $t_{stat} = 51.325$, and $p\text{-value} = 0.000$), and HO₃ ($\beta = 0.168$, $t_{stat} = 3.822$, and $p\text{-value} = 0.000$). Therefore, we reject all stated null hypotheses and accept alternate hypotheses.

Mediation effects

Table 9. Specific Indirect Effects

Hypotheses	Relationships	T. Values	P. Values	Accepted/Rejected
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HO ₄	EP->P->ES	3.817	0.000	Reject the null hypo.
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Professionalism mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success (HO₄, t-stat = 3.817, p = 0.000). This implies that professionalism partially mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and the entrepreneurial success of SMEs in Jos South of the Plateau State, Nigeria.

Test of Hypotheses

From Table 8, the study's findings reveal that

HO1 entrepreneurial passion (EP) positively and significantly leads to entrepreneurial success (ES) of SMEs in Plateau State. The findings revealed that entrepreneurial passion has a positive and significant effect on entrepreneurial success ($\beta = 0.831$, $t = 20.447$, $p < 0.00$). These findings are consistent with those of previous studies by scholars (N. C. Anderson et al., 2018; Dinibutun, 2024).

HO2 entrepreneurial passion (EP) has a positive and significant effect on professionalism. The findings reveal that entrepreneurial passion (EP) has a significant effect on professionalism ($\beta = 0.882$, $t = 51.325$, 0.000).

HO3 professionalism (P) significantly and positively leads to the entrepreneurial success (ES) of SMEs in Plateau State. The findings reveal that professionalism (P) has a significant effect on entrepreneurial success ($\beta = 0.168$, $t = 3.822$, $p < 0.00$). This shows that professionalism in business translates into SME's success in the Plateau State.

Partial mediation

HO4 presents the mediating role of professionalism in the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success of SMEs in Plateau State Nigeria. The total indirect effect of professionalism on the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success was positive and significant (partial mediation). Hypothesis 4, therefore, reveals complementary partial mediation between entrepreneurial passion and the entrepreneurial success of SMEs. The findings explain that professionalism mediates the influence of entrepreneurial passion on entrepreneurial success ($t = 3.817$, $P < 0.000$), which is also shown in the mediation results in Table 9.

All other situations under the condition that both the direct effect EP on ES and the indirect effect "ES on P, P on ES" are significant, which represents partial mediation.

Here, a complementary partial mediation reveals, that the direct effect of "EP on ES" and the indirect effect "EP on P, P on ES" point in the same positive direction (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The connection between entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success is supported by the theory of planned behavior, as the entrepreneurial decision for a business is solely under the control of the entrepreneur. This finding was consistent with the study of N. C. Anderson et al. (2018). Entrepreneurial passion (EP) pushes entrepreneurs to acquire the professional skills needed to run and manage a successful business. This will help reduce the country's unemployment rate. Thus making the youth to be self employed (Yonla, Auta, Katunku, & Dafeng, 2024), avoiding overdependence on Government for paid employment.

These research findings are consistent with the prior study by N. C. Anderson et al. (2018) and Cardon et al. (2017); Cardon, Wincent, Singh, and Drnovsek (2005); Dinibutun (2024); Envick (2014); Kusa and Nson (2023); Neneh (2022); Pepple and Enuoh (2020); Stenholm and Nielsen (2019); Vallerand et al. (2007) who found that entrepreneurial passion had a significant effect on the entrepreneurial success and its indicators.

The effect of the mediator was evaluated using a partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM). This study uses the approach proposed by Risher and Hair Jr. (2017). The mediating effect of professionalism on the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and success was analyzed using

Hair et al. 's (2019) bootstrapping method. The results shown in Table 9 indicate that professionalism significantly mediates the influence of entrepreneurial passion on entrepreneurial success. In addition, the mediation effect was evident because entrepreneurial passion through professional skills and abilities had an indirect effect on entrepreneurial success. This is consistent with the submission of Kusa and Nson (2023), who had previously submitted that skills and abilities are necessary ingredients for a successful business.

In other countries, researchers have also found positive and significant impacts of passion on entrepreneurial success, but because of inadequate finance and lack of managerial practices, owners and managers are hesitant to plan for developing and expanding their business (Kingsley, 2009). SME owners and managers are cautious not to take risks that may deplete their resources or lead to bankruptcy. This phenomenon is due to the very high levels of uncertainty in the Nigerian market and the fluctuations in the business sociocultural and political ecosystem, especially due to the falling standards of the naira.

5. Conclusion

Despite the importance of SMEs and their positive impact on the Nigerian economy, numerous challenges have led to relatively low success rates, especially in the Plateau State. From these findings, we conclude that entrepreneurial passion and professionalism significantly increase the entrepreneurial success of SMEs. Furthermore, this study concludes that professionalism partially mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial passion and the entrepreneurial success of SMEs in Plateau State. Once entrepreneurs develop a passion for entrepreneurial ventures, they raise their confidence to acquire the professional ability to be successful in their entrepreneurial venture. Thus, passionate entrepreneurs are better equipped with the necessary professional skills and abilities to navigate uncertainty and sustain growth in the face of challenges.

The study recommends that entrepreneurs in the Plateau State and Nigeria develop entrepreneurial passion and be ready to adapt to changes in the business environment to be successful. Therefore, SME owners must be flexible and open to strategic business thinking, thereby increasing their chances of mitigating instabilities within their business environment to be successful in their entrepreneurial ventures. Furthermore, entrepreneurs in the Plateau State also need to develop and acquire professional skills and abilities (Kusa & Danladi, 2023) to navigate the fragile business environment. The government can assist with programs that encourage people to develop entrepreneurial passion for businesses in the Plateau State to enable them to compete favorably with foreign-based businesses.

This study is the first to conduct empirical research on the subjective field of entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial success via the role of professionalism. This study analyzed the relationship among the variables that influence the entrepreneurial activities of SME owner-managers in Nigeria. It is also one of the pioneering research projects in the context of a developing country with an emerging economy in Western Africa. Since all the main constructs of this study are emotional, they are not completely affected but are somehow affected by demographic characteristics (gender, level of education, income, marital status, and belonging to subcultures) if not carefully controlled.

Thus, future researchers can investigate these variables as control variables in the proposed links between the main constructs, such as emotions and mental states of human beings, which are subject to change throughout their lifespan (Labouvie-Vief, 2015). Interested researchers are urged to perform a longitudinal study within the SME sector that can shed light on the causal effects of the research constructs on each other and observe the changing trends throughout the research period.

Declaration

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