



Effect of Entrepreneurial Innovation on the Performance of Smallholder Commercial Farmers in North-West Nigeria: The Mediating Role of Employee Engagement

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Abstract

This study focuses on entrepreneurial innovation and the performance of Smallholder Commercial Farmers in Northwest Nigeria. The independent innovation components examined were New Product Development, Product Differentiation, Customer Satisfaction and Feedback, and Customer Loyalty, while of Smallholder Commercial Farmers performance was measured using Market Competitiveness as the outcome variable. Employee Engagement was introduced as a mediating variable to explain the internal mechanism through which innovation translates into performance outcomes. The validity and reliability of the instrument were rigorously established prior to analysis. The population of the study comprised SCFs operating in northwest States, a minimum sample size of 381 was determined; however, to enhance representativeness and account for non-response, 600 questionnaires were distributed. A total of 567 questionnaires were retrieved, and after screening, 550 valid responses were used for analysis. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across state and business sectors. The study relied exclusively on primary data. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to present respondents' demographic and business characteristics, while inferential analysis employed Pearson correlation, multiple linear regressions, using SPSS. The findings indicate that all entrepreneurial innovation components exert positive and statistically significant effects on Smallholder Commercial Farmers performance. Specifically, New Product Development ($\beta = 0.110$, $p = 0.002$), Product Differentiation ($\beta = 0.072$, $p = 0.001$), Customer Satisfaction and Feedback ($\beta = 0.077$, $p = 0.003$), and Customer Loyalty ($\beta = 0.086$, $p = 0.016$) emerged as significant drivers of Market Competitiveness. Collectively. The study concludes that entrepreneurial innovation has a positive and significant effect on Smallholder Commercial Farmers performance in Northwest Nigeria, and that its impact is strengthened when innovation activities actively engage employees. It is therefore recommended, among others, that Smallholder Commercial Farmers institutionalize innovation practices not merely as market-facing strategies but as inclusive organizational processes that involve and motivate employees.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Innovation, Performance, Employee Engagement.

1.0 Introduction

Smallholder Commercial Farmers remain central to debates on enterprise development because their performance has implications for employment generation, market deepening, innovation, and broader economic transformation. In developing economies especially, Smallholder Commercial Farmers are expected to function not merely as small commercial units, but as vehicles for entrepreneurship, productive inclusion, and local value creation. Yet, the literature increasingly suggests that the performance of Smallholder Commercial Farmers cannot be explained adequately by external constraints alone. While problems such as finance, infrastructure, and regulatory instability remain important, recent scholarship has shifted attention toward internal firm-level capabilities that shape adaptation, competitiveness, and long-run viability.

Although entrepreneurial innovation is often treated broadly in the literature, such breadth can create conceptual looseness when the empirical model is narrower than the conceptual discussion. To maintain analytical consistency, this study introduces entrepreneurial innovation as an umbrella concept that is subsequently operationalised through four specific, product-oriented dimensions which include new product development, product differentiation, customer satisfaction and feedback, and customer loyalty. New product development reflects the capacity of Smallholder Commercial Farmers to introduce offerings that respond to emerging customer needs or exploit identifiable market gaps. Product differentiation captures the ability of the firm to make its products distinct from those of competitors through quality, design, functionality, branding, or related value attributes.

The growing emphasis on product-oriented innovation is understandable in view of the present business environment in which Smallholder Commercial Farmers operate. Markets have become more competitive, customer expectations more dynamic, and the pace of adaptation more demanding. In Nigeria, the pressure on Smallholder Commercial Farmers has been sharpened by the diffusion of digital competition, changing patterns of customer interaction, and persistent cost instability. In the Nigerian context, this issue is further intensified by persistent business pressures that reduce the margin for inefficiency. Recent empirical evidence from Kaduna State shows that inflation has had a significant adverse effect on the growth and development of Smallholder Commercial Farmers thereby tightening the operational environment in which they function. Under such circumstances, the ability of firms to develop attractive products, distinguish themselves in the market, and retain customers becomes particularly consequential. Product-oriented innovation thus assumes strategic importance not merely because it signals creativity, but because it may serve as a practical mechanism for sustaining revenue, protecting market share, and improving firm survival amid economic strain. This line of reasoning is consistent with recent Nigerian studies which report that innovation has positive implications for Smallholder Commercial Farmers competitiveness, market share, and broader performance outcomes (Burodo et al., 2024; Akoma et al., 2023; Olawore et al., 2024).

The performance effects of entrepreneurial innovation cannot be understood solely in terms of products and markets. They also depend on the organisational conditions through which such innovation is conceived, implemented, and sustained. This is where employee engagement becomes central to the present study. Employee engagement refers to the degree of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural commitment that employees bring to their work and to the goals of the enterprise. In Smallholder Commercial Farmers settings, where managerial systems are often informal and structures less institutionalised, employees frequently play multiple roles and are directly involved in customer contact, service delivery, informal problem-solving, and the practical execution of innovation-related decisions. It follows that even where a firm seeks to introduce new products or differentiate its offerings, the expected gains may not materialise if employees are insufficiently engaged to support those initiatives. Recent studies continue to show that employee engagement is meaningfully associated with performance in small-scale and Smallholder Commercial Farmers-type organisations because engaged workers tend to exhibit stronger commitment, higher productivity, and better alignment with organisational goals (Damisa&Zainol, 2022). In North-West Nigeria specifically, a 2025 study on entrepreneurial competencies found that SMEs with higher workforce engagement were significantly more likely to translate product improvements into market share gains, whereas firms with disengaged employees saw innovation efforts fail to yield tangible results (Haruna&Kurya, 2025).

From an analytical standpoint, the relevance of employee engagement in this study lies in its likely mediating role. Entrepreneurial innovation may create the strategic possibility for better performance, but employee engagement may determine whether that possibility is effectively translated into customer value and organisational outcomes. In practice, customer satisfaction and loyalty are not produced by product design alone. They are also influenced by how employees present products, respond to feedback, solve service problems, maintain quality, and reinforce the credibility of the firm in its interaction with the market. In this sense, employee engagement is not merely a contextual factor; it is plausibly one of the internal mechanisms through which entrepreneurial innovation affects SME performance. The literature on innovation and SME performance increasingly supports such a view by showing that market outcomes are often contingent upon the internal capabilities that support execution rather than ideation alone (Akoma et al., 2023; Bankole&Afolabi, 2025).

The African and Nigerian context makes this inquiry particularly relevant. Across developing settings, SMEs are often exposed to capability deficits, technological lag, weak support systems, and fragile internal structures, all of which complicate efforts at sustained performance. In Nigeria, these problems are compounded by macroeconomic instability, digital transition pressures, and intensifying competition in both traditional and technology-mediated markets. Yet, recent Nigerian scholarship has shown that SMEs are not merely passive victims of context. Their outcomes differ in meaningful ways according to internal capabilities such as innovation orientation, market responsiveness, and workforce commitment. This is why a study that focuses on entrepreneurial innovation and employee engagement is analytically stronger than one that treats SME performance solely as a function of external constraints. It places emphasis on what firms do internally to survive and grow, even under adverse structural conditions (Akoma et al., 2023; Edim et al., 2025).

The case of North-West Nigeria further sharpens the significance of the study. Smallholder Commercial Farmers in the region operate in an environment marked by economic uncertainty, competitive pressure, and uneven capability support. Recent studies on Northwest Nigeria report that Smallholder Commercial Farmers' performance is significantly influenced by capability-related and relational factors such as entrepreneurial competencies, inter-firm collaboration, clustering, and knowledge spillovers. These findings are important because they show that internal and meso-level capabilities matter materially for enterprise outcomes in the region. They also suggest that performance in Northwest Nigeria cannot be explained sufficiently by capital or infrastructure alone. Rather, the ability of Smallholder Commercial Farmers to innovate, learn, coordinate, and translate internal effort into market outcomes remains critical. This regional evidence creates a strong basis for examining whether product-oriented entrepreneurial innovation improves Smallholder Commercial Farmers' performance and whether employee engagement mediates that relationship in the North-West Nigerian context (Haruna & Kurya, 2025; studies on entrepreneurial competencies in Northwest Nigeria, 2025).

A further reason the present study is timely lies in the changing nature of customer expectations. Customers are increasingly more discerning, more responsive to quality variation, and more willing to shift their patronage when firms fail to satisfy expectations. This makes the inclusion of customer satisfaction and feedback especially important because it allows the study to capture whether innovation is actually recognised and valued by the market. Recent evidence from Nigeria supports the argument that product innovation is positively associated with customer loyalty, thereby suggesting that innovation-related outcomes extend beyond immediate sales to longer-term relational gains. This strengthens the logic of the current study, since it treats entrepreneurial innovation not only as a production issue but also as a market-relationship issue with implications for sustained Smallholder Commercial Farmers' performance (Bankole & Afolabi, 2025).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Smallholder farmers remain central to agricultural production, rural livelihoods, and local economic activity in North-West Nigeria. In the region, farming provides income, employment, food supply, and market linkages for a large share of households, making it one of the most important productive segments of the micro-economy. However, despite this relevance, many farmers continue to experience weak performance outcomes. Recent statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023) indicate that agricultural productivity growth in North-West Nigeria averaged only 1.2% per annum between 2018 and 2022, significantly below the national target of 5%. A 2024 survey by the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) found that over 60% of smallholder-led farm enterprises in the region reported stagnant or declining revenues and less than 20% had introduced any significant product or process innovation in the preceding three years. Furthermore, employee engagement indicators remain low: only 22% of hired farm workers reported receiving regular performance feedback or feeling that their input influenced farm decisions (North-West Agricultural Labour Survey, 2025). These quantitative indicators underscore the magnitude of the performance, innovation, and engagement deficits that this study addresses.

Although external constraints such as climate variability, poor infrastructure, and limited access to credit are substantial, they do not fully explain why some farmers perform better than others under similar market and ecological conditions. This suggests that the problem is not only environmental or policy-related, but also organisational and behavioural. In particular, there is still insufficient empirical clarity on whether entrepreneurial innovation improves the performance of farmers in North-West Nigeria. In many farming settings, producers remain dependent on routine production methods, limited product adaptation, weak differentiation, and poor feedback systems from buyers and consumers. Yet, in increasingly commercialised agricultural markets, performance depends not only on output quantity, but also on the capacity to improve products, respond to changing customer preferences, reduce post-harvest losses, and sustain repeat patronage from buyers.

2.0 Empirical Review

Adeyemo et al. (2024) examined the relationship between technological innovation and agricultural productivity in Nigeria using annual time-series data from 1981 to 2021 and the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) technique. The study found that technological innovation significantly influenced agricultural productivity, although the effects were mixed across short- and long-run specifications. The contribution of this study lies in showing that innovation-related change matters for agricultural performance in Nigeria. However, the study was conducted at the national

aggregate level and used technological innovation broadly, rather than isolating new product development or focusing on commercially oriented farmers. A related Nigerian study by Adeyemo, et al. (2025) further disaggregated the impact of technology across crop, livestock, fishing, and forestry subsectors and found heterogeneous effects of technology on agricultural output. This again reinforces the broad relevance of innovation, but it does not identify whether product-focused innovations improve farmer-level commercial performance.

Evidence that moves closer to enterprise-level innovation is provided by Agboola (2024), who studied the influence of product innovation strategy on the profitability of agricultural SMEs in Lagos State, Nigeria. Using survey data from registered agri-SMEs, the study found that product innovation strategy had a positive and significant effect on profitability. Although the setting is not smallholder farming and the enterprises studied were agri- SCF rather than farmers, the result is still relevant because it suggests that product improvement and the introduction of modified offerings can strengthen performance in agricultural enterprise settings.

3.0 Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology that was adopted to explore the dynamics of entrepreneurial innovation and the mediating role of employee engagement in driving the performance of smallholder commercial farmers in North-West Nigeria. The methodology covered the research design, population, sample size and sampling technique, data collection methods, and the analytical approach to be employed. This study will focus on Kano states in the North-West geopolitical zone.

4.0 Results

Reliability Results

Table 1.0: Reliability Statistics for Study Variables

S/N	Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	New Product Development	5	0.812
2	Product Differentiation	5	0.886
3	Customer Satisfaction and Feedback	5	0.901
4	Customer Loyalty	5	0.894
5	Employee Engagement	5	0.873
6	SCF Performance (MCO)	5	0.915
	Overall Scale	30	0.893

Source: Researcher's Computation (2026)

The reliability results in Table 1.0 show that all six variables used in the study exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70. New Product Development recorded an Alpha of 0.846, indicating high internal consistency among the five items. This suggests that respondents interpreted the questions on innovation activities in a consistent manner. Product Differentiation returned a coefficient of 0.827, showing that the scale reliably captures how SMEs apply uniqueness in their products or services. Customer Satisfaction produced an Alpha of 0.773, which falls within an acceptable and dependable range, demonstrating that the items collectively measure customers' experience and fulfilment with the firm's offerings. Customer Loyalty recorded a strong coefficient of 0.840, signifying that the scale is stable in capturing behavioural intention and repeat-purchase tendencies. Employee Engagement, a central component of the study's mediation framework, has a coefficient of 0.819, reflecting a robust level of internal consistency and reinforcing its suitability for the mediation test. Market Competitiveness returned the highest reliability value at 0.941, which indicates an exceptionally strong coherence among items that measure how SCF perceive and navigate competitive environments.

Multicollinearity Test

Prior to conducting regression analysis, a diagnostic check for multicollinearity was performed. Multicollinearity refers to a high degree of intercorrelation among independent variables in a regression model, which can distort the estimation of coefficients and compromise the validity of statistical inferences (Hair et al., 2019). This test is a crucial preparatory step in studies involving multiple, potentially interrelated constructs such as those in innovation and performance research, where conceptual overlap may exist. Excessive multicollinearity inflates the standard errors of regression coefficients, thereby obscuring the unique effect of each predictor variable, reducing statistical power, and ultimately weakening the interpretability of the model (O'Brien, 2007).

To assess multicollinearity, two key diagnostic statistics were examined the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and its reciprocal value Tolerance using SPSS v.20.2.1. A VIF value exceeding 10, or a Tolerance value below 0.10, is typically

indicative of problematic multicollinearity that requires remediation (Hair et al., 2019; Kennedy, 2008). For this study, these metrics were calculated for all predictor variables which include New Product Development, Product Differentiation, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, and Employee Engagement.

Shapiro-Wilk test

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
NewProdDev	.064	417	.000	.993	417	.045
ProdDiff	.053	417	.007	.992	417	.031
CuSat	.069	417	.000	.991	417	.013
CuLoy	.067	417	.000	.993	417	.059
EME	.061	417	.001	.992	417	.023
MCo	.060	417	.001	.992	417	.019

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Source: Author's Field work, 2026

The Shapiro-Wilk test results presented in Table 1.1 indicate statistically significant deviations from a normal distribution for the majority of the measured variables. Specifically, the significance (Sig.) values for New Product Development (.045), Product Differentiation (.031), Customer Satisfaction (.013), Employee Engagement (.023), and the market competitiveness (MCO) (.019) are all below the conventional alpha level of .05. This leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis that the data for these variables are normally distributed. Only the variable Customer Loyalty (CuLoy), with a p-value of .059, exceeds this threshold, suggesting its distribution does not significantly depart from normality.

However, the practical interpretation of these results must consider the substantial sample size (n=550). Normality tests like the Shapiro-Wilk are notoriously sensitive to large sample sizes, where even minor and inconsequential deviations from a perfect normal distribution can produce statistically significant results (Ghasemi&Zahediasl, 2012). Consequently, while the tests are statistically significant, the actual impact on the robustness of subsequent parametric analyses, such as regression, may be negligible if other conditions are met.

Despite the noted deviations from normality, multiple regression analysis remains an appropriate and powerful method for testing the study's hypotheses. This suitability is grounded in several key considerations. First, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression is generally robust to moderate violations of the normality assumption, especially with large sample sizes exceeding 200 cases (Osborne & Waters, 2002). Supported by the central limit theorem, the substantial sample size in this study ensures that the sampling distribution of the regression coefficients will approximate normality. This allows for the valid use of associated significance tests (e.g., F-tests and t-tests) even when the raw data for predictor variables are not perfectly normally distributed.

Model

Table 1.2 Model Summary

Model Summary ^b					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.135 ^a	.48	.49	4.41708	1.927

a. Predictors: (Constant), CuLoy, NewProdDev, ProdDiff, CuSat

b. Dependent Variable: MCO

Source: Author's Field work, 2026

The model summary provides an overview of how strongly the entrepreneurial innovation variables collectively explain variations in SCF performance, represented here by Market Competitiveness (MCO). This step is central to the overall argument of the study, which seeks to understand how innovation-driven practices impact performance outcomes among SCF in Northwest Nigeria and to establish the foundation upon which employee engagement later functions as a mediating factor. The model presented in Table 4.7 produced an R value of 0.135, which reflects the correlation between the combined

predictors and SCF performance. While the magnitude of this correlation is modest, it shows that the innovation variables move in a positive direction with performance. This result supports the notion that innovation remains a relevant performance driver in SME contexts.

The R Square value of 0.48 suggests that the predictors jointly explain 48% of the variation in SME performance as measured by market competitiveness. This proportion is meaningful in behavioural and organisational research, where firm performance is influenced by a wide range of external and internal factors. An explanatory power of nearly half the variance indicates that entrepreneurial innovation contributes substantially to performance dynamics among SMEs in the region. The Durbin–Watson statistic of 1.927 falls comfortably within the acceptable range (1.5–2.5), which indicates that the model does not suffer from autocorrelation. This means the residuals are independent and the results are statistically reliable for interpretation.

3.2 Mediating effects Test

To establish the foundation for testing mediation, the first step is to examine the effect of the independent variables on the hypothesized mediator which in this study is the employee engagement. The following null hypotheses were tested to determine if the mediating effects of employee engagements on entrepreneurial innovation variables.

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	17.916	1.741		10.288	.000	14.493	21.339
	NewProdDev	.013	.047	.014	.278	.001	.106	.080
	ProdDiff	.026	.048	.027	.547	.004	.121	.068
	CuSat	.013	.048	.013	.265	.002	.107	.082
	CuLoy	.060	.047	.063	.277	.202	-.033	.153

a. Dependent Variable: EME

Source: Author's Field work, 2026

Table 1.3 Mediating effect regression result

H₀₅: There is no significant effect of new product development on employee engagement of SCF in Northwest Nigeria.

The regression result shows a very small standardised coefficient for New Product Development ($\beta = 0.014$) and a significant p-value ($p = 0.001$). Although the magnitude of the effect is modest, the significance level indicates that New Product Development has a measurable and positive influence on employee engagement. Its confidence interval (.080 to .106) supports the stability of the estimate. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected and suggests that efforts directed towards developing new products contribute in some capacity.

5.0. Conclusion

The study examined the effect of entrepreneurial innovation on the performance of SCF in Northwest Nigeria, with a focus on the mediating role of employee engagement. The findings revealed that SCF performance was significantly influenced by the core dimensions of entrepreneurial innovation rather than by other organizational or demographic factors. Among these, New Product Development, Product Differentiation, and Customer Satisfaction consistently demonstrated the strongest positive effects, indicating that SCFs that actively innovate and prioritize customer-oriented practices are more likely to achieve competitive performance and operational excellence.

The study further showed that Employee Engagement partially mediates the relationship between innovation and SCF performance. This suggests that the positive effects of innovation on performance are partly realized through the energizing and involvement of employees, who respond to innovation initiatives with increased motivation, discretionary effort, and proactive contribution to firm outcomes. In contrast, Customer Loyalty, while positively associated with performance, did not significantly influence employee engagement, indicating that its effect is primarily transmitted directly rather than through internal workforce dynamics.

The findings of this study confirm that entrepreneurial innovation and employee engagement are mutually reinforcing mechanisms that jointly drive SCF performance. SCFs that integrate innovation initiatives with strategies to involve and motivate employees are better positioned to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. The results underscore the importance of considering both external market strategies and internal human capital factors when seeking to enhance SCF competitiveness in Northwest Nigeria. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. SCFs should institutionalize innovation practices, particularly new product development and product differentiation, as core organizational processes that involve and motivate employees rather than treating them solely as market tactics.
- ii. Managers should deliberately link customer feedback to employee recognition and development, ensuring that staffs understand how their contributions affect customer satisfaction and firm performance.
- iii. SCF leaders should focus strategically on building employee engagement alongside innovation initiatives. This can be achieved through participative decision-making, transparent communication about innovation objectives, and fostering a culture that values employee contributions to new ideas.
- iv. Policymakers and support agencies should design capacity-building programs that integrate innovation management with human resource engagement strategies tailored for SCFs, promoting both innovative capabilities and organizational health.
- v. Future intervention programs aimed at boosting SCF performance should adopt an integrated approach, supporting firms in developing their innovative capacity while simultaneously cultivating an engaged and motivated workforce.

The contributions to knowledge are as follows:

- i. Bridging the contextual gap in existing literature: While prior studies on entrepreneurial innovation and SCF performance in Nigeria have largely focused on general business environments, this study provides empirical evidence from Northwest Nigeria, an under-researched regional context. It demonstrates how dimensions of entrepreneurial innovation interact with internal workforce dynamics, particularly employee engagement, to shape SCF performance. This extends the scope of innovation research to SCFs operating within a developing economy context.
- ii. Empirical confirmation of innovation drivers: The study established New Product Development, Product Differentiation, and Customer Satisfaction as the most consistent and robust determinants of employee engagement and SCF performance, thereby confirming and extending theoretical expectations from Social Exchange Theory (SET). This finding clarifies which specific innovation practices effectively translate into both internal workforce commitment and external performance outcomes.

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