VOL. 05 NO. 7,
AUGUST, 2024
E-ISSN 3026-9679
P-ISSN 3026-9423

African Scholar Publications & Research International
www.africanscholarpub.com

Journal of Business Dev. and Management Res. (JBDMR)

Effect of Financial Inclusion Initiative on the Growth of Women Small Businesses in Akko Local Government, Gombe State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This study investigates the effect of financial inclusion on growth of women small businesses in Akko Local Government Area, Gombe State, Nigeria. This study adopted a survey research design, the population of the study comprised of 156 registered women small business in Akko Local Government Area, Gombe State. Since the population was small, we used census sampling. The study utilized adapted questionnaire to collect data. The data was analyzed using partial least square structural equation modeling. The study found that access to financial services has positive and statistically significant effect on the growth of women small business in Akko Local Government Area, Nigeria, while, usage of financial services has positive but insignificant effect on growth of women small businesses in Akko Local Government Area at 5% level of significant. The study therefore concludes that financial inclusion influences growth of women small businesses. The study recommends that Women entrepreneurs in Akko Local Government Area, Gombe State, Nigeria should improve on the usage of financial services, this can be achieved through participation in financial literacy and management training programs to improve their understanding of financial concepts, products, and best practices.

Key words: Access to Financial Services, Financial Inclusion, Growth, Small Business, Usage of Financial Service, Women.

Introduction
The role of financial inclusion in fostering economic growth and reducing poverty has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in developing nations (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2017). Financial inclusion, defined as the access to and usage of formal financial services by individuals and businesses, is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor in promoting sustainable development and economic empowerment (World Bank, 2018). In Nigeria, a country grappling with persistent economic challenges, the imperative for

financial inclusion has become more pronounced, especially concerning the growth of small businesses and the economic empowerment of women.

Small businesses play a vital role in Nigeria's economy, contributing significantly to employment generation and economic diversification (Taiwo et al., 2016). However, women-owned small businesses often face disproportionate challenges in accessing and utilizing financial services, hindering their growth potential and overall economic contribution (Eniola & Entebang, 2017). This gender disparity in financial inclusion not only perpetuates economic inequalities but also impedes the nation's progress towards achieving sustainable development goals.

The growth of women's small businesses has been a topic of increasing interest globally. Women often face unique challenges, such as limited access to financial services, poor infrastructure, and cultural barriers, which can hinder the development of their businesses. However, research has shown that empowering women through entrepreneurship can lead to positive economic and social outcomes, not only for the women themselves but also for their communities. In Africa, the growth of women's small businesses has been particularly significant. Studies have highlighted the important role that women entrepreneurs play in contributing to household incomes, reducing poverty, and promoting sustainable development. However, African women entrepreneurs often face additional challenges, such as limited access to finance, technology, and markets, which can impede the growth of their businesses (Vossenberg, 2013; Aidoo et al., 2014; Gupta, A., & Singh, 2021; Kariuki & Kinyua, 2022).

The Nigerian government, recognizing the importance of financial inclusion, launched the National Financial Inclusion Strategy in 2012, aiming to reduce the percentage of adult Nigerians excluded from financial services from 46.3% in 2010 to 20% by 2020 (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2018). Despite these efforts, significant gaps remain, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where traditional banking infrastructure is often limited or absent. Nigeria has also seen a rise in the number of women entrepreneurs and the government has implemented various initiatives to support the growth of women's businesses, among which is to improve financial inclusion. Despite these efforts, women small businesses in Nigeria continue to face significant barriers, including cultural norms and limited access to financial services.

Akko Local Government Area in Gombe State, Nigeria, presents a microcosm of the broader financial inclusion challenges facing the country. As a predominantly rural area with a significant agricultural base, Akko LGA exemplifies the difficulties in extending financial services to underserved populations, especially women entrepreneurs. In Akko LGA, women's businesses in various sectors, such as agriculture, food processing, and handicrafts face challenges including limited access to financial services, lack of awareness to utilize available financial services and limited commercial banks branches have hindered the full realization of their entrepreneurial potential (Gombe State Government, 2020). The lack of access to formal financial services in this region has been identified as a major impediment to the growth and sustainability of women-owned small businesses (Sanusi, 2020).

Furthermore, the primary challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Akko Local Government include limited access to financial services, ineffective utilizations of the available financial service, limited bank branches, cultural biases, and poor infrastructure (Ene et al., 2016). These barriers can hinder the ability of women to secure financing, invest in their businesses, and expand their operations, ultimately limiting the growth and sustainability of their enterprises. While the Nigerian government has made efforts to promote financial inclusion, the effectiveness of these

initiatives in addressing the specific needs and challenges of women entrepreneurs in Akko Local Government unimpressive (Anastesia et al., 2020). Additionally, the extent to which these financial inclusion initiatives have contributed to the growth and development of women's businesses in Akko Local Government is low.

However, scholars have made different submissions in this area, for example, Adeyemi (2019) submitted that Nigeria, like many other developing economies, has been grappling with the challenge of low levels of financial deepening, which is a critical aspect of financial sector development and economic growth. Oyedokun and Amoo (2023) submitted that despite the efforts made by the government and financial institutions to promote financial inclusion, the country's financial system has not achieved the desired depth and breadth to effectively support economic growth and development. Also, Adeniran and Adegbaju (2018) submitted that significant proportion of the population, particularly in rural and underserved areas, remains financially excluded.

Moreover, it was discovered that most of the studies conducted in this area focused more on other dimensions. For instance, Adeyemi and Akindele (2023) focused on impact of financial inclusion policies on financial Deepening in Nigeria, Kim et al. (2018) focused on financial inclusion and economic growth, Oyedokun and Amoo (2023) focused on financial inclusion and performance of the Small and Medium Enterprises in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.

While previous studies have examined financial inclusion in Nigeria at the national level (Kama & Adigun, 2013; Olaniyi & Adeoye, 2016), there is a dearth of research focusing on the specific impact of financial inclusion initiatives on women-owned small businesses in rural and semi-urban areas. Financial inclusive initiatives aim to increase access to financial services, particularly for marginalized groups, including women entrepreneurs. However, the impact of these initiatives on the growth of women's small businesses in Akko Local Government remains underexplored (Gombe State Government, 2020). This gap in the literature underscores the need for localized studies that can show the effectiveness of financial inclusion strategies in promoting women's economic empowerment at the grassroots level, especially in Akko Local Government.

This study aims to address this research gap by examining the effect of financial inclusion initiatives on the growth of women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area, Gombe State, Nigeria. Specifically, it seeks to investigate how access to and usage of financial services impact the growth trajectories of these businesses. Based on these objectives, the study addresses the following hypotheses:

H_{O1}: Access to financial services have no significant effect on the growth of women businesses in Akko Local Government Area, Nigeria.

H_{O2}: Usage of financial services have no significant effect on the growth of women businesses in Akko Local Government Area, Nigeria.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a comprehensive review of the literature on financial inclusion, women's entrepreneurship, and small business growth in developing economies, with a particular focus on Nigeria. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, including the study design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques employed. Section 4 presents the empirical findings of the study, examining the effects of access to and usage of financial services on the growth of women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area. It also discusses these findings in the context of existing literature and their

implications for policy and practice. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper by summarizing the key findings and providing recommendations for the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualization of Financial Inclusion

Financial inclusion is a multifaceted concept that has evolved significantly over the past few decades. At its core, financial inclusion refers to the process of ensuring access to appropriate financial products and services needed by vulnerable groups such as weaker sections and low-income groups at an affordable cost in a fair and transparent manner by mainstream institutional players (Rangarajan Committee, 2008). Financial inclusion is the process of ensuring access to appropriate financial products and services needed by vulnerable groups at an affordable cost in a fair and transparent manner by mainstream institutional players (Okonkwo & Nwanna, 2021).

El Said et al. (2020) posit that financial inclusion means access to and use of financial products and services by households or firms which is one of the main, albeit challenging priorities in Emerging Markets (EMs), and a key factor for financial development. Onaolapo (2015) defined it as a process that ensures the ease of access to or availability of and usage of the formal financial system by all members of the economy. Chima (2011) provided an all-encompassing definition. He defined financial inclusion as the state of financial system where every member of society has access to appropriate financial products and services for effective and efficient management of resources; get needed resources to finance their businesses; and financial leverage to take up opportunities that will lead to increase in their income.

Financial inclusion is achieved when adult Nigerians have easy access to abroad range of formal financial services that meet their needs at affordable costs (CBN, 2018). The services include, but are not limited to, payments, savings, credit, insurance, pension and capital market products. Financial inclusion is the process in which financial services are available to all segments of society, with special attention to the poor, productive poor people, workers migrants, and residents in remote areas (Hakim et al., 2019).

Financial inclusion, in general, is defined as a process of engaging all social groups and disadvantaged groups in having access to formal financial systems (Soyemi et al., 2020). In a broader perspective, Ogunleye and Adeola (2020) defined financial inclusion as individuals and businesses have access to useful and affordable financial products and services that meet their needs e-transactions, payments, savings, credits and insurance delivered in a responsible and sustainable way. Gupta and Singh (2021) defined financial inclusion as ensuring access to formal financial services at an affordable cost in a fair and transparent manner.

The World Bank (2014) defines financial inclusion as the proportion of individuals and firms that use financial services. This definition implicitly recognizes two key dimensions of financial inclusion: access and usage. Access refers to the availability of financial services, while usage pertains to the actual utilization of these services by individuals and businesses. Demirgüç-Kunt and Klapper (2013) further elaborate on these dimensions, suggesting that financial inclusion encompasses the range, quality, and availability of financial services to the underserved and financially excluded. They emphasize that mere access to financial services does not guarantee their usage, highlighting the importance of considering both dimensions in understanding financial inclusion. Corroborating this, the study adapt the component of financial inclusion offered by Ozili (2020) which used access and usage to financial services as the proxy for financial inclusion.

Access and Usage of Financial Services

The access dimension of financial inclusion has been extensively discussed in the literature. Sarma and Pais (2011) conceptualize access as the ease with which individuals can reach financial service providers. This includes physical proximity to banks or other financial institutions, as well as the availability of digital financial services. Beck et al. (2007) add that access also involves the absence of price and non-price barriers to the use of financial services.

Regarding the usage dimension, Zins and Weill (2016) define it as the actual consumption of financial services, including the regularity, frequency, and duration of use over time. They argue that usage is a more accurate indicator of financial inclusion than mere access, as it reflects the real integration of individuals and businesses into the formal financial system. Cámara and Tuesta (2014) propose a comprehensive framework for financial inclusion that explicitly incorporates both access and usage. They suggest three dimensions: access (the supply side of financial inclusion), usage (the demand side), and quality (the effectiveness of the financial sector in providing financial services). This framework underscores the interconnectedness of access and usage in the broader context of financial inclusion.

Allen et al. (2016) further refines the concept of usage by distinguishing between active and passive usage. Active usage involves frequent transactions and engagement with financial services, while passive usage might involve having an account but rarely using it. This distinction is crucial for understanding the depth of financial inclusion beyond mere account ownership. The importance of both access and usage is highlighted by Demirgüç-Kunt et al. (2017) in their analysis of global financial inclusion data. They find that while access to financial services has improved globally, significant gaps remain in usage, particularly among women, the poor, and rural residents in developing economies.

In the context of small businesses, particularly those owned by women, Aterido et al. (2013) emphasize that both access and usage of financial services are critical for business growth and sustainability. They argue that access without usage does not translate into business benefits, and usage is often constrained by factors beyond mere access, such as financial literacy and cultural norms.

In conclusion, these conceptualizations of financial inclusion have evolved to recognize the crucial interplay between access and usage of financial services. While access forms the foundation of financial inclusion by ensuring the availability of services, usage represents the actualization of financial inclusion's potential benefits. Both dimensions are essential for a comprehensive understanding of financial inclusion and its impact on individuals, businesses, and economies.

Conceptualization of Women Entrepreneurship

Women entrepreneurship is a multifaceted concept that has gained significant attention in recent decades, both in academic research and policy discussions. At its core, women entrepreneurship refers to the process by which women create, run, and grow businesses. However, the conceptualization of women entrepreneurship goes beyond this basic definition, encompassing various dimensions and perspectives.

Brush et al. (2009) propose the "5M" framework for understanding women's entrepreneurship. This framework includes Market, Money, Management, Motherhood, and Macro/Meso environment. They argue that while the first three Ms (Market, Money, and Management) are essential for all entrepreneurs, the addition of Motherhood and Macro/Meso environment is crucial for understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs. This

conceptualization highlights the interplay between personal, social, and environmental factors in shaping women's entrepreneurial experiences.

Welter (2011) emphasizes the importance of context in understanding women entrepreneurship. She argues that women's entrepreneurial activities are embedded in and influenced by social, cultural, and institutional contexts. This perspective suggests that women entrepreneurship cannot be fully understood without considering the specific environment in which it occurs, including societal norms, cultural expectations, and institutional frameworks.

Ahl (2006) takes a critical approach to the conceptualization of women entrepreneurship, arguing that much of the existing research is based on masculine norms of entrepreneurship. She proposes a feminist perspective that challenges these norms and calls for a reconceptualization of entrepreneurship that values and incorporates feminine attributes and experiences. This approach emphasizes the need to understand women entrepreneurship on its own terms, rather than as a deviation from male-dominated entrepreneurial norms.

De Bruin et al. (2007) conceptualizes women entrepreneurship as a complex phenomenon that operates at multiple levels: individual, venture, and environment. They argue that research on women entrepreneurship should consider the interplay between these levels to fully understand the challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs. This multi-level approach highlights the need for holistic research that considers both micro and macro factors affecting women's entrepreneurial activities.

Marlow and McAdam (2013) introduce the concept of "gendered entrepreneurship," arguing that entrepreneurship is inherently gendered, and that gender influences all aspects of the entrepreneurial process. They suggest that women entrepreneurs often face additional challenges due to gendered expectations and stereotypes, which can impact their access to resources, networking opportunities, and overall business success.

Jennings and Brush (2013) propose a "gendered view" of entrepreneurship, which recognizes that entrepreneurship is not a gender-neutral phenomenon. They argue that gender plays a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial motivations, resource acquisition, strategic choices, and performance outcomes. This perspective emphasizes the need to consider gender as a central variable in entrepreneurship research and theory.

Vossenberg (2013) conceptualizes women entrepreneurship in developing countries as a potential pathway for women's economic empowerment and poverty reduction. She emphasizes the transformative potential of entrepreneurship for women, not only in terms of economic gains but also in challenging gender norms and promoting social change.

Hughes et al. (2012) highlight the heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs, cautioning against overgeneralization. They argue that women entrepreneurs are not a homogeneous group and that research should recognize the diversity in their motivations, experiences, and outcomes. This perspective calls for nuanced approaches that consider intersectionality and the multiple identities that women entrepreneurs may hold.

Concept of Small Business Growth

Small business growth is a complex concept that has been the subject of extensive research in entrepreneurship and management literature. While growth is often seen as a natural progression for businesses, the conceptualization of growth, particularly for small businesses, varies among scholars. Penrose (1959), in her seminal work, conceptualizes firm growth as an internal process

of development. She argues that growth is not just about size increase but also about the effective use of resources. This perspective emphasizes the qualitative aspects of growth, suggesting that small business growth involves the development of managerial capabilities and the efficient utilization of resources.

Davidsson et al. (2006) propose a multidimensional view of small business growth, arguing that growth can be conceptualized in terms of multiple indicators. They identify three primary dimensions of growth: growth in sales, growth in employment, and growth in assets. This conceptualization highlights the importance of considering multiple metrics when assessing small business growth, rather than relying on a single measure.

Wiklund et al. (2009) expand on this multidimensional view, suggesting that small business growth should be understood as a change in amount. They argue that this change can be measured in terms of various organizational outcomes, including sales, employees, market share, and physical output. This perspective emphasizes the quantitative aspects of growth while acknowledging its multifaceted nature.

Delmar et al. (2003) introduces the concept of "growth heterogeneity," arguing that small businesses grow in different ways and that growth patterns can vary significantly across firms and over time. They propose that growth should be conceptualized as a dynamic process rather than a static outcome, emphasizing the importance of considering growth trajectories and patterns.

McKelvie and Wiklund (2010) further develop this dynamic view, proposing three approaches to conceptualizing firm growth: growth as an outcome, growth as a process, and growth as a context for other organizational outcomes. This framework highlights the multifaceted nature of growth and suggests that different conceptualizations may be appropriate for different research questions and contexts.

Leitch et al. (2010) argue for a more holistic conceptualization of small business growth that goes beyond financial metrics. They suggest that growth should be understood in terms of value creation, which can include non-financial outcomes such as job creation, innovation, and social impact. This perspective broadens the conceptualization of growth to include both economic and social dimensions.

Churchill and Lewis (1983) propose a stage model of small business growth, conceptualizing growth as a series of distinct phases that businesses go through as they develop. These stages include existence, survival, success, take-off, and resource maturity. This model suggests that growth involves qualitative changes in business structure and operations, not just quantitative increases in size.

Achtenhagen et al. (2010) emphasize the subjective nature of growth, arguing that how entrepreneurs perceive and define growth can vary significantly. They suggest that growth should be conceptualized not just in terms of objective measures but also in terms of the entrepreneur's personal goals and aspirations. This perspective highlights the importance of considering the entrepreneur's perspective in understanding small business growth.

Dobbs and Hamilton (2007) propose an integrative framework for small business growth that incorporates both internal and external factors. They conceptualize growth as the result of the interplay between the firm's resources and capabilities, the entrepreneur's characteristics and decisions, and the external environment. This holistic approach emphasizes the complex and dynamic nature of small business growth.

The growth of women small businesses refers to the expansion and development of enterprises owned and operated by women (Alam et al., 2021). This growth can be measured in various dimensions such as increased revenue, expanded market reach, employment generation, enhanced production capacity, and improved business sustainability (Alam et al., 2021). The growth of women's small businesses refers to the process by which these enterprises, often operating in resource-constrained environments, expand their scale, scope, and impact over time. This growth can be manifested through various indicators, such as increased sales, employment, market share, profitability, and geographic reach (Alam et al., 2021; Lans et al., 2017). The growth of women small businesses is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including the availability and utilization of resources, the institutional environment, and gender-specific dynamics (Franzak et al., 2020; Ogundele et al., 2018).

The growth of women small businesses is crucial for sustainable economic development and social progress (Majid et al., 2019). By addressing the key barriers, such as limited access to financial services, markets, and technology, and by harnessing the opportunities presented by targeted interventions and supportive policies, women entrepreneurs can unleash their full potential and contribute to the prosperity of their communities (Amin & Mahmud, 2021). Through collaborative efforts between governments, civil society, and the private sector, the growth of women small businesses can be accelerated, leading to the creation of jobs, the alleviation of poverty, and the advancement of gender equality (Brush et al., 2019).

The growth of women small businesses is essential for economic development and the empowerment of women (Kariuki & Kinyua, 2022). By addressing financial, infrastructural, market, and socio-cultural challenges, and implementing supportive strategies, the growth potential of women entrepreneurs can be significantly enhanced. This growth not only empowers women but also contributes to broader community and national development (Kariuki & Kinyua, 2022). According to Nyarko (2021), growth of women small businesses can be measure by increase in revenue, market expansion, create additional employment opportunities, business sustainability (Long-term sustainability involves adopting practices that ensure the business can continue to operate profitably over time. This includes financial health, risk management, and resilience to economic shocks.)

The conceptualization of small business growth has evolved from simple metrics of size increase to more complex, multidimensional understandings. Modern perspectives recognize growth as a dynamic process influenced by various internal and external factors, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative changes. This provides a rich foundation for understanding the diverse paths and patterns of small business growth, acknowledging that growth can manifest in different ways for different businesses and entrepreneurs.

Access to Financial Services and Growth of Women Small Businesses

The relationship between access to financial services and small business growth in Nigeria has been the subject of numerous empirical studies, each contributing valuable insights to the discourse. This body of research collectively underscores the significant impact of financial inclusion on the development and expansion of small enterprises, while also highlighting persistent challenges in the Nigerian context.

Oyedokun and Amoo (2023) examined financial inclusion and Performance of the SMEs in Ibadan, Oyo State. The financial inclusion theories and Perking Order Theory served as the theoretical

background upon which this study was based. The target population for this study was made up of business centres, grocery stores and fashion houses in the Ibadan Southwest Local Government Area, Oyo State. This study adopted a quantitative survey technique because it was more explanatory and related directly to the SMEs that were selected for the research. Data was collected through primary sources with the use of a structured questionnaire to obtain relevant information from the participants as well as secondary sources. From the research findings, it was discovered that performance of the selected SMEs was influenced positively using financial inclusion parameters of financial service access, usage and quality as measurement. The study found that financial service access, usage and quality all have positive effect on. Performance of the SMEs in Ibadan, Oyo State.

Johnpaul and Patience (2021) examined financial inclusion and its effect on the growth of SMEs in Plateau State, Nigeria. Primary data were collected via questionnaires using simple random sampling techniques. Data were analyzed using Chi-Square. The results show that SMEs in Nigeria have access to financial products that are made available by banks and other financial institutions. Also, financial inclusion significantly affects the growth of SMEs in Nigeria. Furthermore, SMEs customers highly accept financial inclusion and this in turn positively affects the growth of SMEs in Nigeria. In conclusion, financial inclusion plays an irreplaceable role in the growth of SMEs in Nigeria. The study recommends that financial facilities of banks and other financial institutions should be made available at affordable rates for easy accessibility by SMEs in Nigeria.

Ekpe et al. (2010) conducted a seminal study examining the impact of microfinance on women entrepreneurs' business performance in Nigeria. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the researchers surveyed 230 women entrepreneurs and conducted in-depth interviews with 30 participants across three states. Their findings revealed a positive correlation between access to microfinance and business growth, particularly in terms of increased sales and profitability. However, the study also highlighted significant barriers to access, including collateral requirements and high interest rates. The authors recommended tailored microfinance products for women entrepreneurs and the implementation of capacity-building programs. A limitation of this study was its focus on microfinance, potentially overlooking other forms of financial services.

Building on this foundation, Adeola and Evans (2017) investigated the relationship between financial inclusion and the performance of women-owned SMEs in Lagos State. Using a quantitative approach, the researchers surveyed 384 women entrepreneurs and employed multiple regression analysis. Their findings indicated that access to savings accounts, credit facilities, and insurance products was positively associated with business expansion and increased revenue. Notably, the study found that the impact of financial access on growth was moderated by the entrepreneur's level of financial literacy. The authors advocated for comprehensive financial inclusion strategies that combine access to financial services with financial education programs. A critique of this study is its focus on urban Lagos, which may limit its generalizability to rural areas.

Addressing the rural-urban divide, Ogunleye (2019) examined the differential impact of financial access on women-owned businesses in both urban and rural areas of Oyo State. The researcher employed a stratified random sampling technique, surveying 500 women entrepreneurs across different sectors. Using structural equation modeling, Ogunleye found that while financial access positively impacted business growth in both settings, the effect was more pronounced in urban areas. The study attributed this disparity to better financial infrastructure and lower transaction costs in urban centers. Recommendations included targeted interventions to improve financial

access in rural areas and the development of mobile banking solutions to overcome geographical barriers. However, the study's reliance on cross-sectional data limits its ability to capture long-term growth trajectories.

In a novel approach, Nwosu and Orji (2021) explored the role of digital financial services in enhancing access to finance for women-owned small businesses in Nigeria. Their mixed-methods study combined a survey of 400 women entrepreneurs with focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The findings revealed that access to digital financial services was associated with increased business formalization, improved record-keeping, and enhanced access to formal credit. However, the study also highlighted challenges such as low digital literacy and cybersecurity concerns. The researchers recommended investments in digital infrastructure, cybersecurity measures, and digital financial literacy programs. While innovative, the study's focus on digital services may not fully capture the experiences of women entrepreneurs who rely on traditional financial services.

Adebayo et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive study on the impact of various financial access interventions on women-owned SMEs across six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Using a longitudinal design, the researchers tracked 600 women-owned businesses over three years, employing panel data analysis. Their findings indicated that businesses with improved access to a diverse range of financial services (including credit, savings, insurance, and investment products) exhibited more robust growth patterns compared to those with limited access. The study also found that the effectiveness of financial access was influenced by factors such as business sector, entrepreneur's education level, and regional economic conditions. The authors recommended a holistic approach to financial inclusion that considers these contextual factors. A strength of this study is its national scope and longitudinal design, although the three-year timeframe may not capture very long-term growth trends.

Addressing the gender dimension of financial inclusion, Oladejo (2020) assessed the impact of financial inclusion on women-owned SMEs in Southwestern Nigeria. Through a mixed-method approach involving a survey of 400 women entrepreneurs and in-depth interviews, the study revealed that while financial inclusion significantly improves business performance, many women continue to face barriers in accessing financial services. The research advocated for gender-specific financial products and services, though its regional focus may limit the applicability of its findings to other parts of Nigeria.

Abdulkadir et al. (2022) contributed to the discourse by investigating the relationship between access to finance and SME growth in Kano State. Their survey of 384 SMEs, analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis, confirmed the positive impact of financial access on SME growth. However, the study also identified persistent barriers such as collateral requirements and high interest rates, recommending government intervention to address these challenges. A notable limitation of this research was its omission of the informal financial sector, which plays a significant role in the Nigerian economy.

Fletschner and Kenney (2017) reviewed rural women’s access to financial services, a key factor of successful rural development strategies. Designing appropriate financial products for women to be able to save, borrow and insure is essential to strengthen women’s role as producers and widen the economic opportunities available to them. For this purpose it is essential to understand how context-specific legal rights, social norms, family responsibilities and women’s access to and control over other resources shape their need for capital and their ability to obtain it. The study

argues that it is important that development strategies that aim to boost rural women's productive capacity must enhance women's direct access to financial services, i.e. not mediated through their husbands. A second benefit of improving women's direct access to and control over resources is that this leads to higher investments in human capital and have a stronger impact on children's health, nutrition and education with important long-term implications for families and societies. The study details the new products and service delivery models introduced to address some of the constraints faced by women. These include technical innovations that improve access to existing financial services, changes in product design to better tailor products to women's preferences and constraints, and the development of new products such as microinsurance.

Usage of Financial Services and Growth of Women Small Businesses

The nexus between the usage of financial services and the growth of women-owned small businesses in Nigeria has garnered increasing attention from researchers in recent years. This body of empirical work provides crucial insights into the dynamics of financial inclusion and its impact on women's entrepreneurship in the Nigerian context.

Oluitan (2014) conducted a seminal study examining the relationship between financial services usage and the performance of women-owned SMEs in Lagos State. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the researcher surveyed 300 women entrepreneurs and conducted in-depth interviews with 20 participants. The findings revealed a positive correlation between the frequency of financial service usage and business growth, particularly in terms of revenue and asset accumulation. However, the study also highlighted significant barriers to effective usage, including low financial literacy and complex banking procedures. Oluitan recommended targeted financial education programs and simplified banking processes to enhance women's engagement with financial services. While the study provided valuable insights, its focus on urban Lagos may limit its generalizability to rural areas.

Building on this foundation, Adebayo and Nassar (2017) investigated the impact of mobile banking usage on women-owned micro-enterprises in Oyo State. Utilizing a quantitative approach, the researchers surveyed 250 women micro-entrepreneurs and employed logistic regression analysis. Their findings indicated that mobile banking usage was positively associated with business expansion and increased profitability. However, the study also revealed that a significant proportion of women entrepreneurs underutilized available mobile banking services due to technological barriers and trust issues. The authors recommended enhanced digital literacy programs and improved security measures to boost mobile banking adoption. A limitation of this study was its focus on a single financial service, potentially overlooking the broader spectrum of financial products available to women entrepreneurs.

Addressing the rural-urban divide, Okoye et al. (2019) examined the usage of microfinance services among women-owned small businesses in both urban and rural areas of Anambra State. The researchers employed a stratified random sampling technique, surveying 400 women entrepreneurs across different sectors. Using structural equation modeling, they found that while microfinance usage positively impacted business growth in both settings, the effect was more pronounced in urban areas. The study attributed this disparity to better financial infrastructure and higher financial literacy levels in urban centers. Okoye et al. recommended tailored microfinance products for rural women entrepreneurs and increased outreach efforts in rural areas. However, the study's reliance on self-reported data may have introduced some bias into the findings.

Fasanya and Onakoya (2021) explored the relationship between the diversity of financial services used and the growth trajectories of women-owned SMEs in Southwestern Nigeria. Their longitudinal study tracked 150 women-owned businesses over three years, employing panel data analysis. The research revealed that businesses utilizing a broader range of financial services (including savings, credit, insurance, and investment products) exhibited more robust growth patterns compared to those relying on a limited set of services. Notably, the study found that the impact of financial service usage on growth was moderated by the entrepreneur's level of financial literacy. The authors advocated for comprehensive financial inclusion strategies that promote both access to and effective usage of diverse financial services. A critique of this study is its relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of its findings.

In a novel approach, Adeleke and Emefu (2022) examined the role of digital financial services in driving the growth of women-owned online businesses in Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods design, they surveyed 300 women e-entrepreneurs and conducted focus group discussions with 30 participants. Their findings indicated a strong positive relationship between the usage of digital financial services and business scalability, particularly in terms of market reach and transaction volume. However, the study also highlighted challenges such as cybersecurity concerns and the digital divide. The researchers recommended enhanced digital infrastructure, cybersecurity measures, and targeted digital financial literacy programs. While innovative, the stu dy's focus on online businesses may not fully capture the experiences of traditional brick-and-mortar women-owned enterprises.

Anastesia et al. (2020) investigated the effect of financial inclusion on entrepreneurial growth in retail and wholesale sub-sectors in Nigeria using quarterly data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators and the Central Bank of Nigeria. Data were analyzed using correlation analysis and error correction approach. The results reveal that usage of financial services has insignificant positive of effect entrepreneurial growth effect on enter particularly in the context of the retail and the wholesale subsectors contributions to gross domestic product (GDP). The results further indicate that account ownership (ACN) did not have significant influence on the growth rate of the retail and the wholesale sub-sectors, while commercial bank branches (CMB) was found to have significant influence on the growth rate of the retail and the wholesale sub-sectors.

Sanistasya et al. (2019) examined the effect of financial inclusion on women small enterprises (SEs) performance. The research employed explanatory research and a sample that includes 100 SEs in East Kalimantan. The sample was gathered by using non probability sampling technique. By implementing a census approach, the data were gathered from all SEs in East Kalimantan. The study was a quantitative approach and data were analyzed using PLS (Partial Least Square). The unit of level analysis is the SEs business players in East Kalimantan. The results showed a positive but insignificant effect of financial service usage and literacy on women enterprises (SEs) performance and, financial inclusion positively affects the performance of small enterprises (SEs).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study on the effect of financial inclusion initiatives on the growth of women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government, Gombe State, Nigeria, is grounded in an integrated approach combining Financial Inclusion Theory and Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory. This framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the complex interplay between financial access, gender dynamics, and small business growth in the specific context of the study area.

Financial Inclusion Theory forms the cornerstone of this theoretical framework. This theory posits that access to and usage of a wide range of financial services can lead to improved economic outcomes for individuals and businesses (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2017). In the context of this study, financial inclusion theory offers a structured approach to understanding how the availability and utilization of financial services can potentially impact the growth trajectories of women-owned small businesses. The theory encompasses two critical dimensions: access to financial services and usage of financial services. The access dimension focuses on the availability and accessibility of financial services to underserved populations, including women entrepreneurs (Sarma & Pais, 2011). It considers factors such as physical proximity to financial institutions, affordability of services, and absence of discriminatory barriers. The usage dimension emphasizes the actual utilization of available financial services, including the frequency and depth of use (Zins & Weill, 2016). This aspect recognizes that mere access does not guarantee usage, and that effective financial inclusion requires active engagement with financial services.

Complementing the Financial Inclusion Theory, Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory is incorporated to address the gender-specific aspects of this study. This theory posits that women's entrepreneurial experiences and outcomes are shaped by gendered social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Ahl, 2006; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). It challenges traditional, male-centric views of entrepreneurship and emphasizes the need to consider gender-specific barriers and opportunities in entrepreneurial research. In the context of this study, Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory provides a critical lens through which to examine how gender influences access to and usage of financial services among women business owners in Akko Local Government Area. It allows for the exploration of socio-cultural factors that may affect women's ability to leverage financial inclusion initiatives for business growth.

The integration of these two theories creates a robust framework for analyzing the research problem. Financial Inclusion Theory provides the overarching structure for understanding the importance of access to and usage of financial services, while Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory offers a gender-specific perspective through which to examine how women entrepreneurs in Akko Local Government Area experience and navigate financial inclusion initiatives. This combined approach enables a deep examination of how financial inclusion initiatives impact the growth of women-owned small businesses, considering both the general principles of financial inclusion and the gender-specific contexts of women's entrepreneurship in the study area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study on the effect of financial inclusion initiatives on the growth of women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area, Gombe State, Nigeria, employs a quantitative research design. This approach allows for a systematic examination of the relationship between financial inclusion factors and small business growth among women entrepreneurs in the study area.

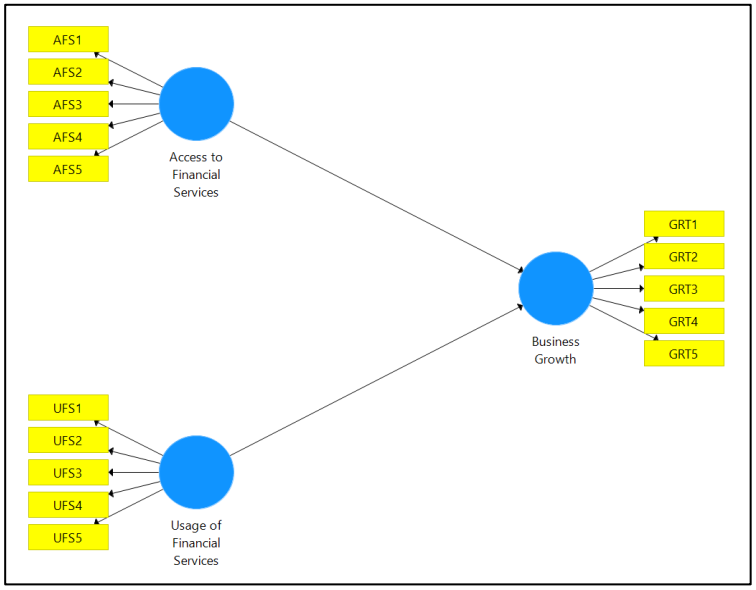
The population for this study comprises all registered women-owned businesses in Akko Local Government Area. According to the Business Registration Unit (2024), there are 156 such businesses officially registered in the area. Given the relatively small population size, a census approach was adopted for sampling. This method ensures comprehensive coverage of the entire population, eliminating sampling bias and providing a complete picture of the phenomenon under study. The census approach is particularly advantageous in this context as it allows for a thorough

examination of financial inclusion's impact across all registered women-owned businesses in the area, enhancing the reliability and generalizability of the findings within the local context.

Data collection for this study utilizes a structured questionnaire adopted from Oyedokun and Amoo (2023). The adoption of an existing, validated instrument enhances the reliability and validity of the data collected. The reliability of the instrument used was accessed using Cronbach alpha of 0.914. Cronbach alpha value of greater than 0.7 is appropriate (Hair, et al., 2022). The questionnaire is designed to capture key variables related to financial inclusion, including access to and usage of financial services, as well as indicators of small business growth. Prior to full-scale administration, the questionnaire was pilot tested with a small group of women entrepreneurs to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the local context. Any necessary adjustments were made based on the feedback from the pilot test. Out of 156 copies of questionnaire administered, 138 copies which constitute 88% of total questionnaire administered were properly filled and useful for the analysis.

The questionnaires were administered through a combination of in-person visits and, where necessary, telephone or online surveys to ensure maximum response rate. Trained research assistants, fluent in both English and the local language, were employed to assist with data collection, particularly in cases where respondents may have limited literacy or prefer to communicate in their native language. This approach helps to ensure the accuracy of responses and minimizes potential misunderstandings.

For data analysis, the study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This advanced statistical technique is particularly suitable for this study due to its ability to handle complex models with multiple constructs and relationships. PLS-SEM allows for the simultaneous examination of the relationships between various aspects of financial inclusion and business growth indicators. It is especially useful in this context as it can effectively handle smaller sample sizes and does not require strict assumptions about data distribution, making it well-suited for the census approach used in this study.



The PLS-SEM analysis was conducted using appropriate software, SmartPLS in this case. The analysis involves a two-step process: first, assessing the measurement model to ensure reliability and validity of the constructs, and second, evaluating the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships between financial inclusion factors and business growth. This approach allows for a robust examination of both direct and indirect effects, providing a comprehensive understanding of how different aspects of

financial inclusion impact the growth of women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area.

To ensure the integrity of the research process, ethical considerations were carefully addressed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality of responses was guaranteed. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Additionally, all data collected was anonymized and stored securely to protect the privacy of the respondents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Assessment of Measurement Model

Indicators' Loadings

The factor loadings presented in table 1 shows the measurement model's quality for the study on financial inclusion and women-owned small business growth in Akko Local Government Area. These loadings represent the correlations between each indicator and its respective construct, offering a measure of how well each item represents its underlying concept.

For the Access to Financial Services (AFS) construct, the factor loadings range from 0.627 to 0.869. Four out of the five items (AFS1, AFS2, AFS3, and AFS4) show strong loadings above 0.8, indicating that these items are robust indicators of the AFS construct. Only the loading for AFS5 (0.627), while lower than the others, is below the commonly accepted threshold of 0.7 but closer, suggesting that it is an acceptable indicator. The particularly high loading of AFS4 (0.869) implies that this item is especially representative of the access to financial services concept in this context.

Table 1: Factor Loadings

Items	Loadings
AFS1	0.815
AFS2	0.822
AFS3	0.836
AFS4	0.869
AFS5	0.627
GRT1	0.897
GRT2	0.892
GRT3	0.862
GRT4	0.742
GRT5	0.884
UFS1	0.878
UFS2	0.918
UFS3	0.936
UFS4	0.937
UFS5	0.910

Source: SmartPLS Output, 2024

The Business Growth (GRT) construct demonstrates consistently high factor loadings across all five items, ranging from 0.742 to 0.897. This suggests that all items are strong indicators of the business growth construct. The notably high loadings for GRT1 (0.897) and GRT2 (0.892) indicate that these items are particularly effective in capturing the essence of business growth among women-owned small businesses in the study area. The relatively lower, but still strong, loading of

GRT4 (0.742) suggests that while this item is a good indicator, it may capture a slightly different aspect of business growth compared to the other items.

The Usage of Financial Services (UFS) construct exhibits exceptionally high factor loadings across all five items, ranging from 0.878 to 0.937. These consistently high loadings indicate that all items are excellent indicators of the UFS construct. The particularly high loadings for UFS3 (0.936) and UFS4 (0.937) suggest that these items are especially representative of financial service usage among the women entrepreneurs in Akko Local Government Area. The uniformly high loadings across all UFS items imply a high degree of internal consistency within this construct.

Overall, the factor loadings demonstrate strong measurement quality across all three constructs. The consistently high loadings, with most exceeding 0.8 and many approaching or exceeding 0.9, indicate that the chosen indicators are highly relevant and representative of their respective constructs in the context of this study. This robust measurement model provides a solid foundation for further analysis of the relationships between access to financial services, usage of financial services, and business growth among women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area.

Validity and Reliability of the Constructs

The results presented in Table 2 provide information about the reliability and validity of the constructs used in the study. For the Access to Financial Services construct, the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.858 indicates high internal consistency reliability, comfortably exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7. The composite reliability of 0.897 further reinforces this, suggesting strong internal consistency among the indicators. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of 0.637 surpasses the 0.5 benchmark, indicating good convergent validity. This means that the construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators.

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Access to Financial Services	0.858	0.902	0.897	0.637
Business Growth	0.910	0.946	0.932	0.735
Usage of Financial Services	0.952	0.958	0.963	0.839

Source: SmartPLS Output, 2024

The Business Growth construct demonstrates excellent reliability and validity metrics. With a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.910 and a composite reliability of 0.932, it shows very high internal consistency. The AVE of 0.735 is particularly strong, suggesting that the construct captures a substantial amount of variance in its indicators relative to measurement error.

The Usage of Financial Services construct exhibits exceptional reliability and validity. Its Cronbach's Alpha of 0.952 and composite reliability of 0.963 are remarkably high, indicating near-perfect internal consistency. The AVE of 0.839 is outstanding, suggesting that the construct explains a very large proportion of the variance in its indicators.

The rho_A values, which provide a more accurate reliability estimate for PLS construct scores, are consistently high across all constructs (0.902 for Access to Financial Services, 0.946 for Business Growth, and 0.958 for Usage of Financial Services). These values further support the reliability of the constructs.

Comparing across constructs, it is notable that the Usage of Financial Services construct demonstrates the highest reliability and validity metrics, followed closely by Business Growth, with Access to Financial Services showing strong, albeit slightly lower, values. This pattern suggests that while all constructs are reliably measured, the indicators for Usage of Financial Services are particularly cohesive and well-defined in this study context.

Discriminant Validity

Table 3 presents the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) results, which are crucial for assessing the discriminant validity of the constructs in the study. The HTMT ratio between Access to Financial Services and Business Growth is 0.234, which is well below the conservative threshold of 0.90. This low value suggests that these two constructs are empirically distinct and capture different concepts in the context of this study. It indicates that the measures of access to financial services are not unduly correlated with the measures of business growth, reinforcing the discriminant validity between these constructs.

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	Access to Financial Services	Business Growth	Usage of Financial Services
Access to Financial Services			
Business Growth	0.234		
Usage of Financial Services	0.294	0.358	

Source: SmartPLS Output, 2024

Similarly, the HTMT ratio between Access to Financial Services and Usage of Financial Services is 0.294. This value, also being substantially below 0.90, demonstrates good discriminant validity between these two constructs. It suggests that while access to financial services and usage of financial services are related concepts in financial inclusion, they are indeed measuring distinct aspects of the financial experiences of women entrepreneurs in Akko Local Government Area.
The HTMT ratio between Business Growth and Usage of Financial Services is 0.358, which is the highest among the three ratios but still well below the 0.90 threshold. This indicates that although business growth and usage of financial services may have some relationship (as one might expect in the context of financial inclusion and business development), they are measuring sufficiently different constructs.

Assessment of the Structural Model

Path Coefficients

The results presented in the path coefficient table 4 shows the relationships between financial inclusion factors and business growth among women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area. These findings allow us to evaluate the study's hypotheses and draw conclusions about the impact of access to and usage of financial services on business growth.

Table 4: Path Coefficient

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Access to Financial Services -> Business Growth	0.149	0.175	0.079	1.887	0.060
Usage of Financial Services -> Business Growth	0.311	0.316	0.081	3.825	0.000

Source: SmartPLS Output, 2024

Hypothesis 1: Access to Financial Services and Business Growth

Regarding the first hypothesis, which likely posited a significant positive relationship between Access to Financial Services and Business Growth, the results show a path coefficient of 0.149. This positive coefficient suggests that increased access to financial services is associated with higher business growth. However, the p-value of 0.060, while close to the conventional threshold of 0.05, indicates that this relationship is not statistically significant at the 5% level. The t-statistic of 1.887 further supports this interpretation, as it falls slightly below the critical value of 1.96 for a two-tailed test at the 5% significance level. Based on these results, we would fail to reject the null hypothesis at the 5% significance level.

This finding aligns partially with previous research but also presents some distinctions. For instance, Olowe et al. (2013) and Taiwo et al. (2016) found significant positive impacts of microfinance access on SME growth in Nigeria. However, our results suggest a weaker relationship in the specific context of Akko LGA. This discrepancy might be explained by the different geographical focus and the specific challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in this area. The weaker relationship between access and growth in our study resonates with Ogunleye's (2019) findings, which highlighted disparities in the impact of financial access between urban and rural areas. Given Akko LGA's predominantly rural setting, our results may reflect the challenges of translating financial access into business growth in such environments.

Moreover, our findings support Adeola and Evans' (2017) observation that the impact of financial access on growth is moderated by factors such as financial literacy. The relatively weak relationship we found might indicate that mere access to financial services is not sufficient to drive significant business growth without complementary factors like financial education or supportive business environments.

Hypothesis 2: Usage of Financial Services and Business Growth

For the second hypothesis, which likely proposed a significant positive relationship between Usage of Financial Services and Business Growth, the results are more definitive. The path coefficient of 0.311 indicates a stronger positive relationship compared to access to financial services. Crucially, the p-value of 0.000 and the t-statistic of 3.825 (well above the 1.96 threshold) provide strong evidence of statistical significance. These results lead to the rejection of the null hypothesis, supporting the alternative hypothesis that there is indeed a significant positive relationship between the usage of financial services and business growth among women-owned small businesses in the study area.

Comparing the two relationships, it is evident that the usage of financial services has a stronger and more statistically significant impact on business growth than access to financial services in this context. This suggests that while having access to financial services is important, it is the actual utilization of these services that more strongly drives business growth for women entrepreneurs in Akko Local Government Area.

This result corroborates Adebayo and Nassar's (2017) findings on the positive impact of mobile banking usage on women-owned micro-enterprises in Oyo State. It also aligns with Fasanya and Onakoya's (2021) observation that businesses utilizing a broader range of financial services exhibited more robust growth patterns. Our finding on the significance of usage over mere access supports Zins and Weill's (2016) argument that usage is a more accurate indicator of financial inclusion than access alone. It also resonates with Allen et al.'s (2016) distinction between active

and passive usage, suggesting that active engagement with financial services is crucial for realizing business growth benefits.

The stronger relationship between usage and growth, compared to access and growth, aligns with Adeola and Evans' (2017) emphasis on the importance of financial literacy. It suggests that women entrepreneurs who not only have access to but actively and effectively use financial services are more likely to experience business growth.

The disparity in the strength and significance of relationships between access and usage with business growth shown an important aspect in the study. It suggests that while access to financial services creates opportunities, it is the actual utilization of these services that drives business growth more directly. This aligns with Okoye et al.'s (2019) findings on the differential impact of microfinance usage between urban and rural areas, highlighting the importance of context-specific factors in translating financial inclusion into business growth.

Our results also support Nwosu and Orji's (2021) findings on the role of digital financial services in enhancing business formalization and access to formal credit. The strong relationship between usage and growth in our study might reflect the increasing importance of digital financial services in facilitating effective financial engagement among women entrepreneurs.

Multicollinearity Test

Table 5 presents the Inner Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for the structural model of the study and it shows the VIF values for the two predictor constructs - Access to Financial Services and Usage of Financial Services - in relation to the outcome variable, Business Growth. Both predictor constructs have identical VIF values of 1.085.

Table 5: Inner VIF Values

	Business Growth
Access to Financial Services	1.085
Usage of Financial Services	1.085

Source: SmartPLS Output, 2024

The VIF value of 1.085 for both Access to Financial Services and Usage of Financial Services is well below the commonly accepted threshold of 5, and even below the more conservative threshold of 3 that some researchers recommend. This low VIF value indicates that there is very little collinearity between these two predictor constructs in their relationship with Business Growth.

The identical VIF values suggest that both Access to Financial Services and Usage of Financial Services contribute equally to any collinearity issues in the model, although the level of collinearity is minimal. This near-absence of collinearity is a positive finding for the study, as it suggests that these two aspects of financial inclusion are distinct predictors of business growth among women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area.

R Square

Table 6 presents the R Square values for the structural model, specifically focusing on the endogenous variable Business Growth. These values show the explanatory power of the model in the context of women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area. The R Square value of 0.145 indicates that 14.5% of the variance in Business Growth is explained by the

predictor variables in the model, namely Access to Financial Services and Usage of Financial Services. The R Square Adjusted value, which accounts for the number of predictors in the model, is 0.132 or 13.2%.

Tabe 6: R Square

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Business Growth	0.145	0.132

Source: SmartPLS Output, 2024

In the context of social sciences and particularly in studies of complex phenomena like business growth, these R Square values can be interpreted as indicating a moderate effect size. While not exceptionally high, they suggest that financial inclusion factors (access to and usage of financial services) do play a meaningful role in explaining the variation in business growth among women-owned small businesses in the study area.

The fact that the R Square and R Square Adjusted values are relatively close (0.145 and 0.132 respectively) indicates that the model is not overfitted, and the inclusion of both predictor variables is justified. This supports the theoretical framework of the study, which posits that both access to and usage of financial services are relevant factors in understanding business growth in this context.

However, it is important to note that these R Square values also suggest that a significant portion of the variance in Business Growth (approximately 85.5%) is explained by factors not included in this model. This is not uncommon in social science research, particularly when studying complex phenomena like business growth, which can be influenced by a wide array of factors beyond financial inclusion.

Effect Size

Table 7 presents the f-square values, which are essential for assessing the effect size of the predictor variables (Access to Financial Services and Usage of Financial Services) on the endogenous variable (Business Growth) in the context of women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area. These f-square values provide insight into the practical significance of each predictor in explaining Business Growth.

For Access to Financial Services, the f-square value is 0.024. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, this value falls between the thresholds for small (0.02) and medium (0.15) effect sizes, indicating a small to modest effect. This suggests that while Access to Financial Services does contribute to explaining Business Growth, its practical significance is relatively limited in this model.

Table 7: F Square

	Business Growth
Access to Financial Services	0.024
Usage of Financial Services	0.105

Source: SmartPLS Output, 2024

In contrast, the f-square value for Usage of Financial Services is 0.105, which is considerably higher. This value approaches the threshold for a medium effect size (0.15) as per Cohen's guidelines. It indicates that Usage of Financial Services has a more substantial practical impact on Business Growth compared to Access to Financial Services in this study context.

Model Fit

Table 8 presents the Fit Summary for both the saturated and estimated models in the study. These fit indices provide useful information about the overall quality of the model and its ability to represent the observed data. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value of 0.073 for both the saturated and estimated models is a positive indicator of model fit. SRMR values below 0.08 are generally considered to represent good fit, suggesting that the discrepancy between the observed correlations and the model-implied correlations is relatively small. This indicates that the model provides a reasonably good representation of the relationships in the data.

Table 8: Fit Summary

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.073	0.073
d_ULS	0.635	0.635
d_G	1.301	1.301
Chi-Square	611.185	611.185
NFI	0.703	0.703

Source: SmartPLS Output, 2024

The d_ULS (unweighted least squares discrepancy) and d_G (geodesic discrepancy) values are both measures of the difference between the empirical correlation matrix and the model-implied correlation matrix. The identical values for both the saturated and estimated models (0.635 for d_ULS and 1.301 for d_G) suggest consistency in the model's performance across different evaluation criteria.

The Chi-Square value of 611.185 for both models is a traditional measure of overall model fit. However, in PLS-SEM, this value should be interpreted cautiously as it can be sensitive to sample size and model complexity. Without additional information about degrees of freedom, it's challenging to make a definitive judgment based on this Chi-Square value alone.

The Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.703 indicates the proportion of improvement of the overall fit of the estimated model compared to a null model. While values closer to 1 indicate better fit, the observed value of 0.703 suggests a moderate level of improvement over the null model. This indicates that while the model provides a better fit than a baseline model, there may be room for further refinement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated the effect of financial inclusion initiatives on the growth of women-owned small businesses in Akko Local Government Area, Gombe State, Nigeria, focusing on two key aspects: access to financial services and usage of financial services. The results reveal the relationship between financial inclusion factors and business growth. While access to financial services showed a positive trend towards influencing business growth, the relationship was not statistically significant at the conventional level. This suggests that mere access to financial services, while important, may not be sufficient to drive substantial business growth among women entrepreneurs in Akko LGA. In contrast, the usage of financial services demonstrated a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship with business growth. This finding underscores

the critical importance of not just providing access to financial services but ensuring that women entrepreneurs actively and effectively utilize these services in their business operations.

These results highlight the complex nature of financial inclusion and its impact on women's entrepreneurship in rural Nigerian contexts. They suggest that while improving access to financial services is necessary, it is the active engagement with and utilization of these services that more directly contributes to business growth. This understanding is crucial for developing effective policies and interventions aimed at promoting women's entrepreneurship through financial inclusion initiatives.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Regarding access to financial services: While access alone didn't show a statistically significant impact on business growth, it is still a positive trend. Policymakers and financial institutions should continue efforts to improve access to financial services for women entrepreneurs in Akko LGA. However, they should focus on addressing potential barriers that may prevent women from fully benefiting from this access, such as financial literacy, cultural factors, or specific business needs.
2. Regarding usage of financial services: Given the strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between usage of financial services and business growth, programs should be developed to encourage and support the active utilization of financial services by women entrepreneurs. This could include financial education initiatives, mentorship programs, or incentives for regular use of banking services, loans, and other financial products tailored to small business needs.

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