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Enhancing Financial Inclusion and Community-Based Economic Resilience through Fintech Adoption among SMEs in Nigeria

Ali Nuhu Abubakar^{1*}, Maryam Rabi'u Zakariyya², Tijjani Lawan Ibrahim³, Hafsat Garba Usman⁴

¹*Department of Business Administration, Maryam Abacha American University of Nigeria Kano, Kano state, 700213, Nigeria*

^{2,3,4}*Department of Business Education, Kano State College of Education and Preliminary Studies, Kano State, 700211, Nigeria*

Abstract. Financial inclusion remains a significant challenge for many Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria, particularly regarding access to formal financial services, digital financial literacy, and sustainable business financing. This community service program aimed to enhance financial inclusion and strengthen community-based economic resilience through the adoption of financial technology (Fintech) among SMEs. The program employed an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach involving 50 SME owners from various business sectors. Activities included needs assessment, financial literacy training, Fintech workshops, hands-on demonstrations, individualized mentoring, and program evaluation. Quantitative data were collected through pre-test and post-test assessments and participant surveys, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews and focus group discussions. The results revealed substantial improvements in financial literacy and Fintech awareness, with average knowledge scores increasing from 52.1% to 83.9%. A total of 94% of participants successfully adopted at least one Fintech service, including digital payment platforms, mobile banking, e-wallets, and online financing applications. Furthermore, the program strengthened community-based economic resilience by fostering collaboration among SMEs, enhancing business networks, increasing access to financial information, and improving participants' ability to respond to economic challenges. The discussion highlighted that the integration of financial literacy, Fintech adoption, and collaborative digital empowerment contributed not only to financial inclusion but also to the development of social capital and community resilience. The program demonstrates that community-based digital financial empowerment can serve as an effective strategy for promoting inclusive economic development and strengthening the sustainability of SMEs in developing economies.

Keywords: Financial Inclusion; Financial Technology (Fintech); SMEs; Economic Resilience; Community Empowerment

1. Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are widely recognized as key drivers of

*Corresponding author's email: alinuhu.abubakar@maaun.edu.ng, Telp. -



economic growth, employment generation, poverty reduction, and local economic development in developing countries (Aladejebi, 2018; Oladipupo & Obazee, 2016; Taiwo & Oyedokun, 2022). Beyond their economic functions, SMEs contribute significantly to community welfare by creating jobs, supporting household livelihoods, and enhancing economic resilience at the local level (Gennari, 2023; Manyanga et al., 2023). In Nigeria, SMEs account for a substantial proportion of business activities and serve as an important source of income for millions of people (John, 2024; Nwangbo et al., 2025; Odumusor et al., 2025). However, despite their strategic role in national and community development, many SMEs continue to face persistent barriers to accessing formal financial services, including limited credit availability, high transaction costs, and inadequate banking infrastructure. These challenges constrain business growth and reduce the capacity of SMEs to contribute effectively to sustainable community development.

Hossain et al. (2022) argues the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the vulnerability of SMEs to financial disruptions and economic shocks. Many businesses experienced declining revenues, liquidity shortages, and operational difficulties during the crisis (Drydakakis, 2022). In response, digital technologies emerged as critical tools for business continuity and recovery. Among these innovations, Financial Technology (Fintech) has gained increasing attention as a mechanism for improving access to financial services and enhancing business resilience. According to Shonubi (2023) and Eze et al. (2023), the adoption of emerging digital technologies significantly improved organizational resilience among Nigerian SMEs during periods of uncertainty. Similarly, Kyari et al. (2024) found that Fintech has become an accessible and cost-effective alternative source of financing for SMEs in Nigeria, enabling businesses to overcome traditional financial constraints and improve operational sustainability.

The rapid expansion of Fintech has transformed financial service delivery across developing economies by introducing innovative solutions such as mobile banking, digital payments, peer-to-peer lending, crowdfunding platforms, and digital wallets. These technologies have reduced geographical and institutional barriers that previously limited access to formal financial systems. Akutson & Sani (2025) argues that Fintech has become one of the most effective instruments for promoting financial inclusion in Nigeria by expanding access to affordable and convenient financial services among underserved populations. Likewise, Carè et al. (2025) and Gupta et al. (2022) emphasize that Fintech plays a crucial role in bridging financial access gaps by connecting excluded individuals and small businesses to formal financial ecosystems.

Existing literature has consistently reported positive relationships between Fintech adoption, financial inclusion, and SME performance. Gunawan et al. (2023) found that financial technology significantly improves SME performance by facilitating access to financial resources and enhancing transaction efficiency. Aldaarmi (2025) and Umar et al. (2025) further demonstrated that financial inclusion is an important determinant of SME sustainability and economic participation in Nigeria. More recently, Irawan et al. (2026), Adukpo & Mensah (2025) reported that financial inclusion mediates the relationship between Fintech adoption and SME performance, suggesting that digital financial services contribute to business growth primarily by improving access to financial opportunities. Similarly, Chaveesuk et al. (2021) showed that digital payment systems and digital lending platforms positively influence financial inclusion among SMEs in Abuja, Nigeria.

Despite these important contributions, the existing body of knowledge remains largely focused on firm-level outcomes such as profitability, productivity, operational



efficiency, and revenue growth. Most studies conceptualize Fintech primarily as a technological or financial innovation that improves business performance. Relatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding how Fintech contributes to community-based economic resilience, particularly in contexts where SMEs function as essential community institutions supporting employment, household income, and local economic stability. While studies by Amnas *et al.* (2024) highlight the relationship between Fintech and financial inclusion, they provide limited insight into the broader developmental implications of digital finance for community resilience and economic empowerment. Furthermore, empirical evidence examining the interconnected relationship among Fintech adoption, financial inclusion, SME performance, and community-based economic resilience in post-COVID-19 Nigeria remains scarce.

This study addresses this gap by extending the discussion beyond traditional business-performance indicators and examining Fintech adoption as a mechanism for strengthening financial inclusion and community-based economic resilience among SMEs in Nigeria. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize organizational outcomes, this research integrates Financial Inclusion Theory with a community development perspective to explore how improved access to digital financial services can generate benefits that extend beyond individual enterprises and contribute to broader community well-being. The study therefore positions SMEs not merely as business entities but also as agents of community economic development whose resilience has direct implications for local livelihoods and socioeconomic stability.

Based on this perspective, the central research question guiding this study is how does Fintech adoption enhance financial inclusion and strengthen community-based economic resilience among SMEs in Nigeria? To answer this question, the study investigates the influence of Fintech adoption on financial inclusion and SME performance while exploring how these outcomes contribute to community economic resilience in the post-COVID-19 environment.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine the role of Fintech adoption in enhancing financial inclusion and strengthening community-based economic resilience among SMEs in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to assess the relationship between Fintech adoption and access to financial services, evaluate its influence on SME performance, and explore its broader implications for sustainable local economic development.

This study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it extends existing Fintech research by moving beyond firm-level performance outcomes toward a community development perspective. Second, it enriches the growing body of knowledge on financial inclusion by demonstrating how digital financial technologies can strengthen local economic resilience through SME empowerment. Third, it provides practical insights for policymakers, development agencies, Fintech providers, and community stakeholders seeking to leverage digital financial innovations as instruments for inclusive economic growth and sustainable community development in Nigeria.

2. Methods

The community service program was implemented among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in selected communities in Nigeria to address persistent challenges related to limited access to formal financial services, low levels of digital financial literacy, and inadequate utilization of financial technology (Fintech) for business development.



Preliminary observations, interviews, and discussions with SME owners, local business associations, and community representatives revealed that many entrepreneurs continued to rely on conventional financial practices, which constrained their ability to access credit, manage business finances efficiently, and strengthen their resilience in an increasingly digital economy. To respond to these challenges, the program adopted an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach (Harrison et al., 2019; South et al., 2024), emphasizing the identification and mobilization of existing community assets, including entrepreneurial capacities, local business networks, and available digital infrastructure, as foundations for promoting financial inclusion and sustainable economic development.

The program was conducted through a participatory process involving 50 SME owners from various sectors, including retail, agriculture, services, and small-scale manufacturing. The implementation began with a needs assessment phase aimed at identifying participants' financial literacy levels, business challenges, and familiarity with Fintech services. Based on the findings, training materials and mentoring modules were developed in collaboration with Fintech practitioners and financial inclusion experts. The intervention consisted of a series of capacity-building workshops covering digital financial literacy, mobile banking, digital payment systems, online financing platforms, financial planning, cybersecurity awareness, and business resilience strategies. To enhance practical understanding, participants engaged in demonstrations, simulations, group discussions, and hands-on exercises related to the use of digital financial applications. Following the training sessions, participants received individualized mentoring and technical assistance to facilitate the adoption of appropriate Fintech solutions for their business operations, including digital transaction management, financial record keeping, and access to alternative financing services.

To assess the effectiveness of the program, a mixed evaluation approach was employed. Quantitative data were collected through pre-test and post-test assessments designed to measure changes in participants' financial literacy and Fintech-related knowledge, while participant satisfaction surveys were used to evaluate the quality and relevance of the activities. In addition, qualitative data were gathered through interviews and focus group discussions to explore participants' experiences, perceived benefits, and challenges encountered during the adoption process. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify changes in participants' knowledge and competencies, whereas the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to financial inclusion, digital transformation, and community-based economic resilience. The success of the program was evaluated based on several indicators, including participant attendance and engagement, improvements in financial literacy scores, the rate of Fintech adoption among participants, enhanced access to financial services, and evidence of strengthened collaboration between SME owners, community organizations, and Fintech providers. Through this integrated approach, the program sought to enhance financial inclusion while fostering sustainable economic resilience within the participating communities.

3. Results and Discussion

The combination of financial literacy training, practical workshops, and continuous mentoring created an enabling environment for participants to develop a better understanding of digital financial services and their potential contribution to business



sustainability. By adopting a participatory and asset-based approach, the program encouraged SME owners to actively engage in the learning process while leveraging existing community resources and entrepreneurial capacities.

The evaluation results indicate that the intervention contributed not only to improved financial knowledge and Fintech utilization but also to broader outcomes related to financial inclusion and economic resilience. Participants demonstrated greater confidence in accessing formal financial services, managing business transactions digitally, and exploring alternative financing opportunities. Furthermore, the collaborative engagement among SME owners, community organizations, and Fintech providers strengthened local support networks that are essential for sustainable economic development. The key findings of the program are presented in the following sections.

3.1. Improvement of Financial Literacy and Fintech Awareness among SMEs

One of the primary objectives of this community empowerment program was to enhance the financial literacy and Fintech awareness of SME owners in participating communities. Before the intervention, many participants possessed only a basic understanding of financial management and had limited exposure to digital financial services. Most business transactions were conducted using cash, while record-keeping practices were often informal and inconsistent. Furthermore, participants demonstrated limited awareness of digital payment systems, mobile banking services, online lending platforms, and financial management applications that could potentially improve business efficiency and financial accessibility. These findings confirmed that inadequate financial literacy remained a significant barrier to financial inclusion and sustainable business growth among SMEs.

The program delivered a series of structured training workshops focusing on digital financial literacy, financial planning, electronic payment systems, mobile banking applications, cybersecurity awareness, and responsible use of online financial services. The workshops were designed using participatory learning methods, including interactive lectures, case studies, group discussions, simulations, and hands-on demonstrations. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and discuss the financial challenges they encountered in their daily business operations. This interactive approach enabled participants to connect theoretical knowledge with practical applications, thereby improving their understanding of how Fintech solutions could address existing financial constraints.

In addition to classroom-based training, participants received personalized mentoring sessions that provided practical guidance on using various Fintech platforms. These mentoring activities focused on helping SME owners register digital payment accounts, utilize mobile banking services, monitor financial transactions electronically, and explore alternative financing opportunities through digital platforms. As participants became more familiar with these technologies, many reported increased confidence in managing their business finances and conducting transactions through digital channels. The mentoring component was particularly important because it provided continuous support and reduced the anxiety often associated with adopting new technologies.

The effectiveness of the program was assessed through pre-test and post-test evaluations administered before and after the intervention. The assessment measured participants' knowledge across several dimensions, including financial literacy, digital payment systems, mobile banking utilization, online financing services, and cybersecurity



awareness. The results demonstrated substantial improvements across all indicators, reflecting the positive impact of the training and mentoring activities on participants' knowledge and competencies.

Table 1 Changes in Financial Literacy and Fintech Awareness Scores (n = 50)

Indicator	Pre-Test Mean (%)	Post-Test Mean (%)	Improvement (%)
Basic Financial Literacy	58.4	84.2	25.8
Digital Payment Knowledge	52.6	86.8	34.2
Mobile Banking Utilization	49.8	82.5	32.7
Online Financing Awareness	45.7	80.3	34.6
Cybersecurity Awareness	54.1	85.6	31.5
Average Score	52.1	83.9	31.8

The data presented in Table 1 indicate a substantial improvement in participants' financial literacy and Fintech awareness following the intervention. The average score increased from 52.1% during the pre-test to 83.9% in the post-test, representing an overall improvement of 31.8 percentage points. The highest gains were observed in online financing awareness (34.6%) and digital payment knowledge (34.2%), suggesting that participants particularly benefited from learning about alternative financing opportunities and digital transaction systems. Significant improvements were also recorded in mobile banking utilization and cybersecurity awareness, highlighting the effectiveness of the program in addressing both technical and risk-related aspects of Fintech adoption. These findings demonstrate that targeted financial education and mentoring initiatives can significantly enhance SMEs' readiness to engage with digital financial services and strengthen their participation in formal financial ecosystems.

Beyond the quantitative improvements, qualitative feedback obtained through interviews and focus group discussions further highlighted the positive outcomes of the program. Many participants reported that they had previously perceived digital financial services as complex, risky, and suitable only for larger businesses. However, after participating in the training and mentoring sessions, they recognized that Fintech applications could be practical, accessible, and beneficial for small enterprises. Several participants expressed greater confidence in managing digital transactions, monitoring business cash flow, and exploring financing opportunities through online platforms. These findings suggest that improving financial literacy is not merely a matter of increasing knowledge but also involves changing perceptions, building confidence, and fostering a positive attitude toward financial innovation. Consequently, financial literacy enhancement serves as a critical foundation for promoting financial inclusion and supporting the long-term economic resilience of SMEs within local communities.

3.2. Adoption of Fintech Solutions for Business Operations and Financial Inclusion

A major outcome of the community empowerment program was the successful adoption of various Fintech solutions by participating SMEs. Prior to the intervention, most participants relied heavily on cash-based transactions and traditional financial practices, which often limited their ability to manage finances efficiently and access formal financial services. Many SME owners reported difficulties in maintaining accurate



financial records, processing customer payments, and obtaining business financing from conventional banking institutions. These challenges not only constrained business growth but also increased financial vulnerability, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty. The program therefore focused on equipping participants with the practical skills and knowledge necessary to integrate digital financial technologies into their daily business operations.

Through a combination of training workshops, hands-on demonstrations, and personalized mentoring, participants were introduced to a range of Fintech applications designed to support business activities. These included digital payment platforms, mobile banking services, e-wallets, online lending applications, and cloud-based financial management tools. Participants were guided through the process of creating accounts, conducting digital transactions, managing electronic payments, and monitoring business cash flows using mobile applications. The mentoring sessions played a crucial role in reducing technological barriers and building participants' confidence in utilizing digital financial services. As a result, many SME owners began to perceive Fintech not merely as a technological innovation but as a practical solution for addressing everyday business challenges.

The adoption of Fintech technologies contributed significantly to operational efficiency among participating SMEs. Participants reported that digital payment systems reduced transaction processing times, minimized cash-handling risks, and improved customer convenience. Mobile banking applications enabled business owners to conduct financial transactions remotely, reducing the need for frequent visits to banking institutions. Furthermore, digital record-keeping tools allowed entrepreneurs to track income, expenses, and cash flow more systematically, thereby improving financial decision-making. Several participants indicated that the availability of real-time financial information helped them better manage working capital and plan future business activities. These improvements demonstrate how Fintech can enhance business productivity while simultaneously supporting more effective financial management practices.

Beyond operational improvements, the program also strengthened financial inclusion by expanding participants' access to formal financial services. Before the intervention, many SME owners had limited interaction with formal financial institutions and often relied on informal lenders, family members, or personal savings to finance their business activities. Following the adoption of Fintech platforms, participants gained greater access to digital banking services, electronic payment systems, and alternative financing options such as peer-to-peer lending and online microcredit facilities. This increased accessibility enabled several entrepreneurs to secure business financing that had previously been difficult to obtain through traditional banking channels. As a result, participants were better positioned to invest in business expansion, inventory management, and operational improvements.

The extent of Fintech adoption among participants is presented in Table 2. The evaluation was conducted three months after the completion of the training and mentoring activities to assess the sustainability of technology utilization within participants' businesses.



Table 2 Adoption of Fintech Services among Participating SMEs (n = 50)

Fintech Service Adopted	Number of SMEs	Percentage (%)
Digital Payment Platforms	45	90.0
Mobile Banking Services	42	84.0
Digital Financial Record-Keeping Applications	38	76.0
Online Financing Platforms	31	62.0
E-Wallet Services	40	80.0
SMEs Adopting at Least One Fintech Service	47	94.0

The findings presented in Table 2 demonstrate a high level of Fintech adoption among participating SMEs following the intervention. A total of 94% of participants successfully adopted at least one Fintech service, indicating the effectiveness of the program in promoting digital financial inclusion. Digital payment platforms emerged as the most widely adopted technology, utilized by 90% of participants, followed by mobile banking services (84%) and e-wallet applications (80%). The adoption of digital financial record-keeping applications by 76% of participants suggests an increasing awareness of the importance of systematic financial management. Although online financing platforms recorded the lowest adoption rate at 62%, this figure still reflects a significant improvement compared to the pre-intervention condition, where very few participants had ever utilized digital financing services. Overall, the results indicate that targeted training and mentoring can effectively facilitate Fintech adoption, improve access to formal financial services, and contribute to greater financial inclusion among SMEs operating in underserved communities.

3.3. Strengthening Community-Based Economic Resilience through Collaborative Digital Empowerment

One of the most significant outcomes of the program was its contribution to strengthening community-based economic resilience through collaborative digital empowerment. While the adoption of Fintech technologies generated direct benefits for individual SMEs, the broader impact extended to the community level through the creation of stronger networks, enhanced cooperation, and improved collective capacity to respond to economic challenges. Prior to the intervention, many SME owners operated independently with limited interaction with other entrepreneurs, financial institutions, or technology providers. This lack of collaboration often restricted access to information, financial opportunities, and business support mechanisms. Through the implementation of the program, participants became actively involved in a collaborative learning environment that encouraged knowledge sharing, peer support, and collective problem-solving.

The participatory nature of the intervention played a crucial role in fostering stronger relationships among stakeholders. SME owners, local business associations, community leaders, and Fintech service providers were engaged throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of the program. This inclusive approach promoted mutual trust and facilitated the exchange of ideas regarding digital business practices, financial management, and entrepreneurial development. Participants reported that regular interactions with fellow business owners enabled them to learn from each other's experiences, discuss common challenges, and identify practical solutions. The involvement of community leaders and local organizations further strengthened



institutional support for digital transformation initiatives, creating a more favorable environment for sustainable economic development.

Another important outcome was the formation of peer-learning networks that continued to function beyond the formal duration of the program. These networks served as platforms for exchanging information on digital financial services, market opportunities, and business management strategies. Through mobile communication groups and periodic meetings, participants maintained regular contact and provided mutual assistance when facing operational or financial difficulties. Several participants reported that the peer-learning groups helped them stay informed about new Fintech services, government support programs, and alternative financing opportunities. The development of these social networks contributed to the accumulation of social capital, which is widely recognized as a critical factor in enhancing community resilience and supporting long-term economic sustainability.

The program also improved participants' capacity to withstand economic shocks and market uncertainties. Through greater access to digital financial services, SME owners were able to diversify their financing sources, manage business risks more effectively, and maintain financial stability during periods of fluctuating market conditions. The adoption of digital payment systems and online financial platforms reduced dependency on physical transactions and enabled business continuity during disruptions caused by economic downturns, mobility restrictions, or supply chain challenges. Participants indicated that digital financial tools enhanced their ability to adapt quickly to changing market environments by facilitating remote transactions, improving cash flow monitoring, and providing access to emergency financing options when needed.

To evaluate the broader community-level impacts of the program, participants were asked to assess perceived changes in economic resilience, collaboration, and adaptive capacity following the intervention. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Perceived Community-Level Outcomes of the Digital Empowerment Program (n = 50)

Community Resilience Indicator	Number of Participants Reporting Improvement	Percentage (%)
Improved Business Networking	46	92.0
Increased Access to Financial Information	44	88.0
Stronger Collaboration among SMEs	42	84.0
Enhanced Ability to Respond to Economic Challenges	40	80.0
Improved Access to Alternative Financing	39	78.0
Greater Confidence in Business Sustainability	43	86.0

The findings presented in Table 3 demonstrate that the program generated substantial positive impacts on community-based economic resilience. The highest level of improvement was reported in business networking, with 92% of participants indicating stronger connections with other entrepreneurs and stakeholders. Increased access to financial information (88%) and greater confidence in business sustainability (86%) were



also widely reported, suggesting that the intervention enhanced both knowledge resources and entrepreneurial optimism. Furthermore, 84% of participants observed stronger collaboration among SMEs, while 80% reported improved capacity to respond to economic challenges. The increased access to alternative financing opportunities reported by 78% of participants further highlights the role of digital financial inclusion in strengthening local economic resilience. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that collaborative digital empowerment initiatives can generate benefits that extend beyond individual enterprises by fostering social capital, strengthening community networks, and enhancing the overall capacity of local communities to adapt to economic uncertainties and sustain long-term development.

3.4. Discussion: Fintech Adoption as a Catalyst for Financial Inclusion and Community-Based Economic Resilience

The findings of this study demonstrate that financial literacy enhancement, Fintech adoption, and collaborative digital empowerment collectively contribute to strengthening financial inclusion and economic resilience among SMEs. The significant improvement in participants' financial literacy and awareness of digital financial services supports the argument that knowledge is a prerequisite for successful technology adoption. This finding is consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) proposed by Fred D. Davis, which suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt technology when they perceive it as useful and easy to use. Through training and mentoring activities, participants developed a clearer understanding of the practical benefits of Fintech applications, leading to increased confidence and willingness to utilize digital financial services. Similar findings were reported by Morgan & Long (2020), who found that financial literacy significantly influences the adoption of digital financial technologies among small business owners by reducing uncertainty and increasing perceived usefulness.

The improvement in Fintech awareness observed in this program can also be explained through the lens of Diffusion of Innovation Theory developed by Lee (2024). According to this theory, innovation adoption occurs gradually as individuals gain knowledge, develop positive attitudes, make adoption decisions, implement innovations, and confirm their usefulness. The training workshops and mentoring sessions functioned as channels for knowledge dissemination, enabling participants to move through these stages more effectively. The high level of adoption reported among participants indicates that the intervention successfully reduced informational barriers that often hinder technological diffusion in developing economies. This finding supports previous studies showing that educational interventions accelerate the diffusion of digital financial technologies among underserved communities and small enterprises.

The second major finding, namely the increased adoption of Fintech applications for business operations and financial inclusion, aligns with the concept of financial inclusion promoted by institutions such as the World Bank and the Alliance for Financial Inclusion. Financial inclusion refers to the availability and accessibility of affordable financial products and services for individuals and businesses. The adoption of digital payment systems, mobile banking services, e-wallets, and online financing platforms enabled participants to access formal financial ecosystems that had previously been beyond their reach. This outcome is consistent with the work of Demirgüç-Kunt et al. (2022), who argue that digital financial services play a critical role in reducing barriers to financial



access, particularly for SMEs operating in underserved regions. The findings therefore suggest that Fintech can serve as an effective mechanism for bridging gaps between formal financial institutions and small business communities.

The operational improvements reported by participants further support the Resource-Based View (RBV) developed by Barney (1991). RBV posits that organizations achieve competitive advantages by acquiring and utilizing valuable resources and capabilities. In this context, digital financial technologies can be viewed as strategic resources that enable SMEs to improve transaction efficiency, financial management, and access to financing opportunities. The enhanced ability of participants to monitor cash flows, maintain financial records, and conduct digital transactions demonstrates how technological capabilities can strengthen organizational performance. Similar conclusions were reported by studies conducted by Haddad & Hornuf (2019), which found that Fintech adoption contributes to productivity gains and business growth by improving operational efficiency and financial decision-making processes.

Beyond individual business performance, the findings highlight the importance of collective empowerment in strengthening community resilience. The emergence of peer-learning groups, stronger business networks, and increased collaboration among stakeholders reflects the principles of Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes the value of social relationships, trust, and networks in facilitating collective action. According to Sakamoto (2024), communities with strong social capital are better equipped to mobilize resources, share knowledge, and respond to external challenges. The collaborative interactions established through this program enabled participants to exchange experiences, provide mutual support, and access information more effectively. These outcomes suggest that digital empowerment initiatives can strengthen not only financial capacity but also the social structures necessary for sustainable community development.

The broader community-level impacts observed in this study are also consistent with the principles of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). ABCD emphasizes identifying and mobilizing existing community assets rather than focusing solely on deficiencies (Chupp et al., 2023; Qiaoyu et al., 2024). The program leveraged local entrepreneurial capacities, community networks, and existing digital infrastructure to promote sustainable economic transformation. Rather than positioning SMEs as passive beneficiaries, the intervention encouraged participants to actively utilize their knowledge, relationships, and resources to address financial challenges. The positive outcomes observed in terms of financial inclusion, business collaboration, and resilience demonstrate the effectiveness of asset-based approaches in fostering community empowerment and long-term development.

The findings indicate that Fintech adoption functions as more than a technological innovation; it serves as a catalyst for financial inclusion, business development, and community resilience. The integration of financial literacy enhancement, digital technology adoption, and collaborative community engagement created a mutually reinforcing process that strengthened both individual enterprises and the broader local economy. These results support contemporary perspectives on inclusive digital development, which emphasize that sustainable economic transformation requires not only access to technology but also the development of human capital, social capital, and community assets. Therefore, future community development programs should integrate digital financial literacy, Fintech utilization, and participatory empowerment strategies to maximize their contribution to inclusive and resilient local economic development.



4. Conclusions

This community service program successfully enhanced financial inclusion and community-based economic resilience among SMEs in Nigeria through financial literacy improvement, Fintech adoption, and collaborative digital empowerment. The findings demonstrated that the combination of training, mentoring, and practical exposure to digital financial services significantly improved participants' understanding of Fintech applications and increased their confidence in utilizing digital payment systems, mobile banking services, online financing platforms, and financial management tools. The high adoption rate of Fintech services among participants further indicates that targeted capacity-building interventions can effectively reduce barriers to financial access and support the integration of SMEs into formal financial ecosystems.

The discussion revealed that the outcomes of the program extend beyond individual business performance. Consistent with the principles of the Technology Acceptance Model, Diffusion of Innovation Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Asset-Based Community Development, the intervention facilitated not only technological adoption but also the strengthening of social networks, collaborative learning, and collective problem-solving among SME owners. The establishment of peer-learning groups, stronger business partnerships, and increased access to financial information contributed to the development of social capital and enhanced the capacity of local communities to adapt to economic uncertainty. These findings suggest that financial inclusion initiatives are most effective when they combine technological empowerment with community engagement and participatory development approaches.

Despite the positive outcomes, this program has several limitations. The intervention involved a relatively small number of participants and was conducted within a limited implementation period, making it difficult to assess the long-term sustainability of Fintech adoption and its broader economic impacts. Future community service initiatives should involve larger and more diverse SME populations, extend mentoring and monitoring periods, and incorporate stronger collaboration with financial institutions, government agencies, and technology providers. Further programs may also explore the integration of advanced digital financial services, entrepreneurship development, and digital business transformation strategies to strengthen community resilience and support sustainable local economic development in the long term.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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