

ENTREPRENEURIAL TRAINING AND BUSINESS PERFORMANCE OF YOUTH-OWNED SMES

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Abstract

This paper examined how entrepreneurial training, acquisition of skills and mentoring influences the performance of the youth-based Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Abia and Imo states in Nigeria. A quantitative research design was employed, and the survey method was adopted to gather data on 400 of the youth-owned SMEs, whose sample was taken among 4,215 registered businesses through multistage sampling technique. The paper concentrated on three major areas, which were the impact of participation on entrepreneurial training on sales growth, the impact of community acquisition of entrepreneurial skills on profitability, and the impact of entrepreneurial mentoring support on innovation performance. The analysis of data was performed with the help of descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis to test the relationships between variables. The results obtained indicated that the effects of engagement in entrepreneurial training were extremely strong and statistically significant and positive ($r = 0.950$, $p < 0.01$), which proved that the impact of training programs on the performance of the business is positive. On the same note, entrepreneurial skills acquisition turned out to be a major profitability enhancing factor ($r = 0.934$, $p < 0.01$) which underscores the significance of managerial, financial and opportunity identification skills in increasing financial performances. It was also determined that entrepreneurial mentoring support has a positive impact on innovation performance ($r = 0.937$, $p < 0.01$), which proves that the system of guided mentoring contributes to the progress of products, process optimization, and new technologies. The research concludes that the overall entrepreneurial interventions: training, skill development and mentoring are important in the growth, profitability, and innovation abilities of young headed SMEs. Possible recommendations are to reinforce practical training programs, reinforce structured mentoring, and supportive policies to carry through with the SME growth and innovation. These can be applied in policy formulation, development agencies, and practitioners who are interested in improving youth entrepreneurship and regional economic development.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial training, Skills acquisition, Mentoring, SMEs performance, Youth entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is also becoming more and more a core source of economic growth, innovation, and job creation, especially in developing areas, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where unemployment rates among youth are a serious problem (Card et al., 2018; Blattman et

al., 2022; Leger et al., 2024). In line with this, entrepreneurial training has become a strategic policy instrument, which is projected to empower young entrepreneurs with technical expertise, managerial skills, imagination, and soft skills that can sustain successful businesses (Chioda et al., 2023; Dammert and Nansamba, 2019). Business-focused in content but interpersonal and behavioural skills development programmes aim to overcome the limitations to the growth of the youth-led SMEs, the lack of innovation, strategic planning, financial literacy, client management, and operational efficiency, that often restrict the business growth prospects (Ubfal et al., 2022; Gielnik et al., 2025). Such training interventions have become considered as essential instruments of empowering young entrepreneurs in the developing economies to promote liberal development and competitive business practices by instilling entrepreneurial attitudes and resilience, as well as problem-solving skills.

Government agencies and donor organisations have been spending a lot of money in youth entrepreneurship programs in Nigeria as a way of alleviating unemployment, SME development and sustainable livelihoods. Even with such interventions, there are still gaps as to the effectiveness of entrepreneurial training in converting into quantifiable performance results in terms of profitability, sales growth, innovation potential, and business survival (Okere and Ihua-Jonathan, 2024; Agu et al., 2024; Daniel and Ezeamuzie, 2024). Such issues are especially pronounced in the case of Abia and Imo States in which the SMEs owned by youths prevail in the entrepreneurship field yet fail to achieve a uniform level of performance even after their enrolment in the different training programs. Low productivity, poor record keeping mechanisms, lack of financial management skills, and poor growth in the market are still challenges to many young business owners. This trend shows that there has always been a lack of matching training programs with the realities of youth entrepreneurs. Other issues like lack of mentoring, inadequate contextualisation of training modules, lack of post training finances as well as ineffective monitoring mechanisms also limits the effectiveness of such programmes, which is also an indication of a more in depth empirical investigation.

The theories can give a more profound understanding of why entrepreneurial training can affect the business performance of youth-owned SMEs. The Human Capital Theory assumes that investments in both knowledge and skill development are quite effective in improving individual productivity and, therefore, structured entrepreneurial learning would bolster the innovation ability, managerial competence, and sound decision-making of young

entrepreneurs (Becker, 1993; Card et al., 2018; Ubfal et al., 2022; Chioda et al., 2023). In addition to that, the Resource-Based View (RBV) posits that resources that can be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable are the sources of competitive advantage, and the entrepreneurial training reinforces such resources by providing the entrepreneur with rare skills, strategic capabilities, and adaptive business knowledge (Barney, 1991; Gielnik et al., 2025; Weers and Gielnik, 2021; Leger et al., 2024). Moreover, Experiential Learning Theory emphasises the importance of learning by doing, reflecting, conceptualising, and trying things, which contributes to increasing creativity, identification of opportunities, and self-efficacy, and, eventually, business performance (Kolb, 1984; Toh et al., 2025; Tselepis, 2018; Gielnik et al., 2025).

These theoretical assertions are empirically supported as various studies have shown that entrepreneurial training (especially when approached to local settings and supported with mentoring) is a valuable tool that has shown to significantly improve business outcomes in the form of profitability, innovation, customer relationship, and operational efficiency. Randomized control trials, panel data analysis, and regression studies, which were done in Liberia, Jamaica, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, demonstrate uniform findings in terms of financial discipline, record-keeping, enterprise sustainability, and revenue growth in trained entrepreneurs (Dammert and Nansamba, 2019; Ubfal et al., 2022; Blattman et al., 2022; Uju et al., 2022). The results of systematic reviews show that non-formal, short-duration programmes prove to be the most effective in cases when they involve the follow-up support and context-specific information (Leger et al., 2024; Chioda et al., 2023). Nonetheless, there are huge gaps in the context of the Southeast Nigeria in regards to context-driven and causal assessment of training impacts on youth SME performance. Such elements as the local market limitations, the lack of access to finance, the poor performance of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and the impossibility of converting acquired knowledge into measurable performance still restrict the overall impact of training programs (Winterstorm Varlander et al., 2020; Toh et al., 2025). This is why the dynamics of entrepreneurial support systems within the context of Abia and Imo States are important to understand and implement effective and evidence-based entrepreneurial support systems that can lead to competitiveness, innovation, and sustainable growth.

Based on the foregoing, the current research was able to fill the existing gaps by examining how much entrepreneurial training impacted the business performance of youth-owned SMEs in the state of Abia and Imo. In particular, the study was intended to:

1. Determine the role of participation in entrepreneurship training on sales growth;
2. Determine the effect of community acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and profitability; and
3. Establish the influence of entrepreneurial mentoring support on innovation performance of youth based SMEs.

Methodology and Procedure

The research design used in the study was a quantitative research design which aimed at studying the effect of entrepreneurial training on the performance of the youth owned SMEs in the Abia and Imo States. The survey design was used because it allowed the collection of data in a systematic way using standardized tools and further analysis of the relationship between business performance results and the exposure to entrepreneurial training. It was shown in the documents of the State Ministry of Commerce and SME Development Agency that there were 4,215 registered youth-owned SMEs within the two states. To calculate the statistically representative sample, Cochran formula of finite population was used and the minimum sample size calculated was 364 respondents. The sample size was increased to 400 respondents to take into consideration its possible non-responses.

A representative sampling method was used which is a multistage sampling method. The two states were taken deliberately because they are concentrated with youth-owned businesses. The SMEs were then broken down into sector and services, retail, manufacturing, and agro-processing. In each sector, the respondents were randomly chosen to represent the various types of businesses equally. This strategy enabled the paper to understand sectoral and regional differences in entrepreneurial experiences and performances.

The data were gathered via a structured questionnaire that was divided into some sections where the demographic currents were comprised of, receiving entrepreneurial training, receiving entrepreneurial skills, mentoring experience, applying the training knowledge, and the business performance measures of sales growth, profitability, and innovation had to be included. The respondents graded statements using a five-point Likert

scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument had been pre-tested to make it clear, valid and reliable.

The analysis of collected data was done with the help of descriptive and inferential statistics. Micrommeans, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages were used in summarizing the experiences and distribution pattern of the participants. The hypotheses were tested and the relationship between the independent variables (training, skills acquisition, mentoring) and the dependent variables (sales growth, profitability, innovation) using a significance level of 0.01, through Pearson correlation analysis. The approach allowed the researcher to conduct a thorough evaluation of how the entrepreneurial interventions affected the business performance of youth-led SMEs in the research region.

Results

Table 1: Statistics

		Participatio n in Entrepreneu rial Training	Application of Training Knowledge	Entrepreneu rial Skills Acquisition	Entrepreneu rial Mentoring	Sales Growth	Profitability and Innovation
N	Valid	400	400	400	400	400	400
	Missin g	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.6300	3.5575	3.5800	3.2925	3.4600	3.3325
Std. Deviation		1.16898	1.19594	1.16705	1.25933	1.20292	1.19814

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the study variables with a mean of 3.63 (SD = 1.16898) as the Participation in Entrepreneurial Training, 3.5575 (SD = 1.19594) Application of Training Knowledge, 3.58 (SD = 1.16705) Entrepreneurial Skills Acquisition, 3.2925 (SD = 1.25933) Entrepreneurial Mentoring, 3.4 These average scores are an indication that the respondents agreed moderately with the statements in each variable indicating that they are actively involved in the training, acquisition of skills, mentoring and have a noticeable effect in business performance. The standard deviation of mentoring is relatively higher, which points to the difference in the experience of the participants, meaning that some of them were greatly guided and others were rather sparsely supported. In general, this table offers a ground-level insight into how youth-based SMEs understood the effects of the entrepreneurial interventions with respect to the knowledge, skills, and business performance.

Table 2: Participation in Entrepreneurial Training

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	28	7.0	7.0	7.0
	D	46	11.5	11.5	18.5
	UN	68	17.0	17.0	35.5
	A	162	40.5	40.5	76.0
	SA	96	24.0	24.0	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows the frequency of Participation in Entrepreneurial Training. Amongst the 400 respondents, 28 (7.0) strongly disagreed, 46 (11.5) disagreed, 68 (17.0) was undecided, 162 (40.5) agreed and 96 (24.0) strongly agreed. The findings show that most of the participants (64.5%) have affirmed positively that they were engaged in entrepreneurial training and this implies that the young based SMEs have been active in the programmes meant to improve their knowledge and skills in business. The cumulative percentages also indicate that there is progressive trend of agreement, i.e. serving as an indication that being involved in training is a normal practice among youth entrepreneurs in the area, and this is reflective in terms of enhancing awareness of business and possible expansion in businesses.

Table 3: Entrepreneurial Skills Acquisition

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	28	7.0	7.0	7.0
	D	51	12.8	12.8	19.8
	UN	70	17.5	17.5	37.3
	A	163	40.8	40.8	78.0
	SA	88	22.0	22.0	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 indicates the distribution of Entrepreneurial Skills Acquisition. The results show that 28 (7.0) of the respondents strongly disagreed, 51 (12.8) disagreed, 70 (17.5) were neutral, 163 (40.8) agreed and 88 (22.0) strongly agreed that they had acquired relevant skills during training. Most of the 62.8 percent reported to have acquired managerial, problem-solving, financial literacy, opportunity identification and interpersonal skills. This distribution means that entrepreneurial training is effective in promoting skills among the youth-based SMEs, which increases their ability to handle operations, make sound decisions, and react to business challenges, which is key in bettering individual and enterprise-level performance.

Table 4: Entrepreneurial Mentoring

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	46	11.5	11.5	11.5
	D	67	16.8	16.8	28.2
	UN	81	20.3	20.3	48.5
	A	136	34.0	34.0	82.5
	SA	70	17.5	17.5	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 shows the frequency table of Entrepreneurial Mentoring. In this case, 46 (11.5) respondents strongly disagreed, 67 (16.8) disagreed, 81 (20.3) neutral, 136 (34.0) agreed and 70 (17.5) strongly agreed. The numbers of those who positively benefited as a result of mentoring were only 51.5% meaning that some entrepreneurs were significantly guided, whereas others were insignificantly or not guided at all. The differences in the percentage of disagreement and neutral answers are relatively high, implying that there is no consistency in the implementation of mentoring, and more formal and open mentoring programmes should be provided in order to provide overall support that will impact the innovation and confidence in making business decisions.

Table 5: Sales Growth

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	34	8.5	8.5	8.5
	D	58	14.5	14.5	23.0
	UN	77	19.3	19.3	42.3
	A	152	38.0	38.0	80.3
	SA	79	19.8	19.8	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 presents the frequency distribution of Sales Growth of the youth based SMEs. The results indicate that 34 (8.5) respondents strongly disagreed, 58 (14.5) disagreed, 77 (19.3) were neutral, 152 (38.0) agreed and 79 (19.8) strongly agreed that their sales had improved after the training. The positive results of 57.8 percent indicate that entrepreneurial training was a moderate contributor to the growth of sales, market penetration, product development, and acquisition of customers. According to the results, the training interventions have a positive influence on the business performance, and some entrepreneurs might need the extra help in order to devote the acquired knowledge to tangible sales growth.

Table 6: Application of Training Knowledge

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	32	8.0	8.0	8.0
	D	51	12.8	12.8	20.8
	UN	68	17.0	17.0	37.8
	A	160	40.0	40.0	77.8
	SA	89	22.3	22.3	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Table 6 uses frequency distribution of Application of Training Knowledge. The respondents were asked about whether they used the training knowledge in their business and most of them said that they did so with a strong disagreement (32) or disagreement (51), neutral (68) strong agreement (160) and strongly agree (89). Most of them (62.3) who are implementing strategies, financial techniques and marketing methods are showing that training knowledge is being operationalized. The implications of these findings are that the use of learned knowledge is paramount in improving the daily performance of the business, therefore making the use of experiential and practical aspects of entrepreneurial training programmes significant.

Table 7: Profitability and Innovation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	36	9.0	9.0	9.0
	D	68	17.0	17.0	26.0
	UN	89	22.3	22.3	48.3
	A	141	35.3	35.3	83.5
	SA	66	16.5	16.5	100.0
	Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 is the frequency of Profitability and Innovation. The table indicates that 36 (9.0) percent strongly disagreed, 68 (17.0) percent disagreed, 89 (22.3) percent neutral, 141 (35.3) percent agreed and 66 (16.5) strongly agreed that their businesses have been improved in terms of profitability and innovation. The positive results reported by the majority (51.8) is a moderation of financial performance and innovative capacity of the youth based SMEs. The findings suggest that training and acquiring of skills can increase profitability and innovation though other interventions like availability of finance, market connection and continuous mentoring can be required to sustain the growth of the business.

Test of Hypothesis One

H₀: Participation in entrepreneurial training has no significant effect on the sales growth of youth-based SMEs.

H₁: Participation in entrepreneurial training has significant effect on the sales growth of youth-based SMEs.

Table 8: Correlations on Hypothesis One

		Participation in Entrepreneurial Training	Sales Growth
Participation in Entrepreneurial Training	Pearson Correlation	1	.950**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	400	400
Sales Growth	Pearson Correlation	.950**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	400	400

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation analysis of Hypothesis One (that is, testing the effect of involvement in entrepreneurial training on sales growth) is given in Table 8. The correlation coefficient of Pearson is 0.950 ($p < 0.01$), which is very strong and positive and statistically significant. This means that the increase in the level of attendance in entrepreneurial training is positively correlated with the growth in sales of the youth-based SMEs. The result indicates that the null hypothesis is rejected, which proves that the active participation in the training process has a decisive and quantifiable impact on the business growth.

Test of Hypothesis Two

H₀: Acquisition of entrepreneurial skills has no significant effect on the profitability of youth-based SMEs.

H₁: Acquisition of entrepreneurial skills has significant effect on the profitability of youth-based SMEs.

Table 9: Correlations on Hypothesis Two

		Entrepreneurial Skills Acquisition	Profitability and Innovation
Entrepreneurial Skills Acquisition	Pearson Correlation	1	.934**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	400	400
Profitability and Innovation	Pearson Correlation	.934**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	400	400

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 9 presents the Pearson correlation under Hypothesis Two that tests the impact of entrepreneurial skills acquisition on profitability. The correlation coefficient is 0.934 ($p < 0.01$) with the value being very large and highly significant that suggests that better managerial, problem-solving, financial, and opportunity identification skills have a significant positive impact on profitability in youth-led SMEs. This proves that learning entrepreneurial skills is a key factor in raising financial performance and this fact proves the alternative hypothesis and the relevance of skill based training programmes.

Test of Hypothesis Three

H₀: Entrepreneurial mentoring support has no significant effect on the innovation performance of youth-based SMEs.

H₁: Entrepreneurial mentoring support has significant effect on the innovation performance of youth-based SMEs.

Table 10: Correlations on Hypothesis Three

		Innovation Through Training Knowledge	Entrepreneurial Mentoring
Innovation Through Training Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	1	.937**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	400	400
Entrepreneurial Mentoring	Pearson Correlation	.937**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	400	400

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 10 shows the correlation analysis of Hypothesis Three, which is the effect of entrepreneurial mentoring on innovation performance. The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.937 ($p < 0.01$) which indicates a very strong and significant relationship. This implies that mentoring support has a positive impact on the outcome of innovation such as product development, process improvement, and the adoption of new technologies. The finding helps reject the null hypothesis, which demonstrates that structured mentoring is one of the most important determinants in promoting innovative capacities among youth-based SMEs.

Discussion of Findings

The research results show that the outcome of participation in entrepreneurial training plays a significant positive role on the performance of the youth based SMEs in the state of Abia and Imo. Tables 1 and 2 indicated that most of the respondents were actively engaged in training with the mean being 3.63 with a range of 3.63 and the frequency table indicated that 64.5% of the participants confirmed that they were engaged in entrepreneurial training programmes. This interaction resulted in better knowledge application as participants stated that they applied financial, managerial, and marketing strategies to their operations (Weers and Gielnik, 2021; Gielnik et al., 2025). These findings are in line with other literature that has found exposure to structured entrepreneurial education to boost applied business skills and lead to increase in sales, customer base, and product or service development (Menya et al., 2020; Uju et al., 2022).

The learning of entrepreneurial skills as reported in Table 3 and 6 was found to have a positive impact on the profitability of the business. The mean score, 3.58 -3.55, reflected the acquisition of better managerial, problem-solving, financial literacy and communication. The effectiveness of training interventions is reflected in the fact that approximately 62.8% of the participants stated that they were able to develop these skills successfully (Dammert and Nansamba, 2019; Chioda et al., 2023). Such conclusions are in line with studies that skill development, especially as applied to problem-solving and financial management, directly influences the operational efficiency and profitability of SMEs (Christopher Blattman et al., 2022; Agu et al., 2024). The findings of the correlation ($r = 0.934$, $p < 0.01$) are also another confirmation that entrepreneurial skills are closely linked to better financial results.

A more subtle influence was found in entrepreneurial mentoring as shown in Table 4. Though 51.5% of the participants were guided, the mean scores were lower ($M = 3.29$, $SD =$

1.26) indicating that there was an unequal access to structured mentoring. Regardless of this, mentoring was indicated to positively influence the performance of innovation, including product development and new technology adoption, which is supported by the large correlation coefficient ($r = 0.937$, $p < 0.01$). This result coincides with previous studies that highlight the importance of mentorship to facilitate the decision-making process of an entrepreneur and the development of innovative abilities (Winterstorm Varlander et al., 2020; Toh et al., 2025). The mentoring impact difference observed implies that standard and universally available mentoring programmes should be used to achieve uniform benefits among the youth entrepreneurs.

Table 5 shows that both the participation in training and the use of knowledge had positive effects on sales growth with a mean of 3.46 to 3.64. The findings reveal that real-life use of learned skills leads to the direct growth of businesses, product enhancements, and getting new customers (Ubfal et al., 2022; Daniel et al., 2023). In the same way profitability and innovation, which is indicated on Table 7, were moderately increased ($M = 3.33$ - 3.49), indicating that training and acquisition of skills offer a platform through which financial stability and process innovation is attained. The results can be compared to the literature indicating that entrepreneurial-related interventions have positive impacts on finances and innovations under the condition of their efficient implementation (Leger et al., 2024; Okere and Ihua-Jonathan, 2024).

All in all, the investigation underscores the relationship between training, acquisition of skills, and mentoring in promoting the performance of business in relation to the youth-owned SMEs. Entrepreneurial training is significantly associated with rising sales ($r = 0.950$, $p < 0.01$), acquisition of skills augments profitability ($r = 0.934$, $p < 0.01$) and mentoring assists innovation ($r = 0.937$, $p < 0.01$). These findings support the importance of holistic entrepreneurial interventions, which encompass practical training-based, mentor-based, and skills-based entrepreneurial interventions and as a result, foster sustainable SME development (Blattman et al., 2022; Gielnik et al., 2025; Agu et al., 2024). The standard deviations recorded in the variables show some variation in the experiences of the participants, which makes the application of individualized interventions to overcome the difference in exposure to and engagement in entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

The researchers reviewed how entrepreneurial training, acquisition of skills as well as mentoring support influences the performance of young based SMEs in Abia and Imo states. The results indicate that the sales growth is considerably boosted by the involvement in entrepreneurial training, whereas the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills affects the profitability in a strong positive way. Also, formal entrepreneurship mentoring is a major contributor to the performance of the youth owned SMEs in terms of innovation. On the whole, the research confirms that integrated interventions, i.e., training and skills development with mentoring are important in enhancing business performance, such as financial performance, market expansion, and the ability of innovations. The findings of this research support the notion that offering holistic entrepreneurial services to young people is important as it does not only equip them with skills and knowledge but also boosts self-confidence and ability to run and expand businesses (Agu et al., 2024; Gielnik et al., 2025; Weers and Gielnik, 2021).

Recommendations

The following ideas are hereby recommended based on the findings:

1. **Enhance Entrepreneurial Training Programs:** The government agencies and non-governmental organizations ought to increase and diversify the entrepreneurial training programs to focus on both soft and hard business skills. This will guarantee that the youth entrepreneurs would gain managerial, financial, and marketing skills needed to develop their businesses.
2. **Encourage Practical Learning with Skills:** The training programs are to focus on practical and experiential learning methods, which would allow the participants to use the learned knowledge in their business activities. This will improve profitability and operational efficiency.
3. **Introduction of Structured Mentoring Programs:** SMEs are supposed to be subjected to regular and systematic mentoring programs in order to inform decision making, enhance innovation and offer business support. Formal mentoring will decrease the differences in the mentorship experiences and enhance the outcomes of innovations.
4. **Support Business Sustainability:** Policymakers have to offer various supplementary interventions like financial support, market access, and networking in addition to training

and mentoring. This comprehensive strategy will help SMEs to continue their growth and innovations in the long run.

5. **Ongoing Review and Feedback:** Training and mentoring programs need to be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis with the purpose of evaluating the effect, finding gaps, and making sure that youth entrepreneurs are provided with the appropriate and effective support.

Overall, to improve the performance, profitability, and innovation of the youth-led SMEs in the study region, a multi-faceted strategy of designing training, application of practical skills, and organized mentoring is crucial to boost their performance.

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