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STRATEGIC ORIENTATION INFLUENCE ON SMEs EXPORT PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA: MEASUREMENT VALIDATION AND PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This research is aimed at enhancing comprehension and validation of the variables that drive the export performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. Notwithstanding the paucity of evidence regarding the export experiences of SMEs from developing countries in the literature, studying the SME setting is crucial, given its growing significance in enhancing national and global economies. A survey design was used to gather data from owners and managers of Nigerian SMEs that were involved in exports. Based on convenience sampling, 450 questionnaires were distributed. Of this number, 278 valid responses were returned. The study model was assessed via partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), and the statistical package for social science (SPSS v24) was used for preliminary analysis. The results seem to suggest that

the seven-construct measurements—entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, learning orientation, export orientation, export knowledge, access to finance, and export performance—are well suited for estimating the variables under investigation in a Nigerian setting. Similarly, the direct relationship between the exogenous and endogenous constructs was positive and significant. The outcomes validated applying the dynamic capability view and its principles to explain the success of the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria.

Keywords: Strategic orientations, SMEs, export performance, measurement validation, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The growing body of academic research on the factors influencing the success of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) has shown a need to explore topics relevant to their export-related activities. Export operations of SMEs have been acknowledged as essential for a nation's socioeconomic prosperity since they generate income, create jobs, produce high-quality products, stimulate competition, and uplift living standards (Abubakar, 2022; Basah, 2019; Chong et al., 2022; Haddoud et al., 2021; ITC, 2020; Morgan & Katsikeas, 1997; Temiz et al., 2015). For these firms to keep making such an impact, they should continue enhancing their performance amidst dwindling markets and intensifying rivalry (Harrison & Pooe, 2022). It is noteworthy that accessing international markets allows businesses to improve their competitiveness and success (Haddoud et al., 2021; Hsu et al., 2013).

Accordingly, empirical research has discovered and examined the significance of constructs that boost export success and the benefits that follow for the business owners and the whole economy (Avenyo et al., 2020; Boso et al., 2016; Di Fatta et al., 2019; Gera, 2019; Martin & Javalgi, 2019; Sraha, 2015). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that these factors influence exporting businesses' long-term viability and success (Gera, 2019). Therefore, identifying the economic values attached to exports has sparked curiosity about the determinants of a firm's export performance (Avenyo et al., 2020). If exports improve economic prosperity (Haddoud et al., 2021), then comprehension of the antecedents of the export performance of SMEs, especially in Nigeria, is paramount to helping them achieve their objectives and to fashioning the fiscal recovery during hard times brought on by

unstable oil revenue and the global COVID-19 pandemic, both of which have harmed the country's economy.

Studies have also shown that strategic constructs like entrepreneurial, learning, market, and export orientations help SMEs explore and take advantage of international opportunities. The empirical evidence confirms the importance of these strategic variables for the export success of SMEs. For instance, entrepreneurial orientation significantly impacts enterprise performance (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Higher entrepreneurial orientation levels are associated with better international success for businesses (D'Angelo & Presutti, 2019). Additionally, Falahat et al. (2021) discovered that market and learning orientations favorably impact the export performance of SMEs. Likewise, export knowledge and access to finance influenced the performance of SMEs in the export market (Di Fatta et al., 2019; Okello et al., 2017; Sibanda et al., 2018). Also, Harrison and Pooe (2022) has illustrated that there is a positive correlation between export orientation and performance.

For both large and small businesses to stay competitive, expanding their reach into international markets and investigating and taking advantage of any location-specific advantages is becoming essential (Debellis et al., 2021). Exporting contributes to socioeconomic prosperity and helps nations recover from global crises (Mansion & Bausch, 2020). This is especially true for small and medium-sized businesses, which account for 90 percent of all enterprises and generate more than 50 percent of the annual global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (WorldBank, 2021). Over the past 20 years, the internationalization activities of African SMEs have grown significantly (Boso et al., 2019), indicating that these companies are becoming increasingly involved in global markets. According to these global statistics, SMEs are the pillars of the African economy, as 80 percent of jobs in the region are created by SMEs. In Nigeria, SMEs comprise 96 percent of the nation's businesses (LSEG Africa Advisory Group, 2018). Therefore, SMEs are essential to Africa's future prosperity because they can create a new middle class and increase demand for regional products and services. Thus, scholars studying international entrepreneurship who have been examining the internationalization efforts of African SMEs have taken an increasing interest in this development.

However, the research model is not new. The present study is timely since SMEs dominate the global business landscape and have a

substantial impact on economic growth. Based on the context of the present study, SMEs are the backbone of any nation's economic growth. Economic development in each nation is in tandem with the development of its SMEs. Businesses, especially those in developing nations, should prioritize exports since they help them expand into previously untapped markets (Mahamadou, 2021). Thus, there is a clarion call for more research output in SMEs to obtain an overall growth of the nation's economy.

Accordingly, evidence indicates that African SMEs face significant challenges that hamper their growth despite the numerous scholarly works on SME export performance and their critical role in propelling the continent's economic development. Similarly, there is a dearth of empirical literature on the determinants of their performance, particularly in developing economies like Asia and Africa (Haddoud et al., 2021; Zahoor et al., 2020, 2023). Thus, a vexed question regarding the antecedents of these firms' performance remained passed over, which warrants the current investigation. Furthermore, the present research satisfies requests for additional studies to determine what factors will be able to enhance SME export performance in developing nations like Nigeria (Haddoud et al., 2021; Paul, 2020). Although the vast majority of this kind of study approach was used in developed nations (Haddoud et al., 2021; Paul, 2020; Tuominen et al., 2022), their findings cannot be generalized and applied to developing economies due to contextual dissimilarities. Since the measurements of the variables were initially used in developed settings, their relevance in Nigeria and other developing nations may not be appropriate without contextual validation. Consequently, obtaining scientifically valid and reliable items would be invaluable in examining the determinants of SME export performance in Nigeria.

Additionally, the scholarship on African SME internationalization has developed in a fragmented and disjointed way, both empirically and conceptually, even though many efforts have been made to advance research on Africa and penetrate the boundaries of the international entrepreneurship research field (Zahoor et al., 2023). Previous academic works on the internationalization of African SMEs have differing theoretical stances, methods, and contexts. Moreover, little agreement has been reached regarding the nature and extent of the international business activities of these firms or how they recognize international opportunities at their founding stage (Zahoor et al., 2023). Therefore, little research has been done on the variables influencing the performance of African SMEs abroad (Zahoor et al., 2023).

Furthermore, exporting SMEs in Nigeria are grossly underperforming as their contribution to the nation's GDP is minimal, contrary to the government's initiative to build a robust private sector that will employ as many citizens as possible and reduce over-reliance on dwindling oil revenue as a means of generating foreign earnings (Chukwu et al., 2022; SMEDAN, 2021). The underwhelming performance of SMEs in Nigeria is a matter of considerable worry for SME owners and the Nigerian government. This underscores the need to identify the variables that will improve their performance for the benefit of the owners and diversify the nation's economic basis. To that end, this paper's primary goal is to provide further information regarding validating the measurement of SME export performance constructs, namely entrepreneurial, learning, market, export orientations, access to finance, and export knowledge among Nigerian SMEs that have yet to be investigated. Therefore, all seven variables will be measured and validated. In addition, the direct relationship between the independent and dependent variables will be tested. However, the subsequent analysis will examine access to finance and export knowledge as mediator and moderator. The results of this research will support the extant literature on the determinants of SME export performance in Nigeria and other developing countries with akin attributes. Also, future researchers will be able to compare findings across different settings, and this will enable them to thoroughly understand the constructs used in developing nations. Consequently, it will facilitate the coherent interpretation of the results and their application in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Overview

Dynamic capabilities and Export Performance

Resources that are unique is important for creating and preserving a competitive advantage that affects export performance (Teece, 2014). Small businesses, like SMEs, must constantly coordinate and harmonize their available resources to achieve better, more endearing results (Teece, 2016). As a result, dynamic capability enables businesses to produce innovative products, foster rivalry, and quickly adjust to changing environments (Ahmad et al., 2023; Teece et al., 1997). Additionally, businesses utilize dynamic capabilities as

essential sources of long-term competitive advantage to maximize their resources and provide better results (Krasnikov & Jayachandran, 2008). Thus, enterprises must be flexible and adaptive in rearranging and coordinating their resources and competencies to recognize and capitalize on market opportunities (Teece, 2016; Teece et al., 1997).

Moreover, dynamic capabilities are considered more advanced actions businesses take in response to shifts in market dynamics (Teece, 2016). These changes require integrating and realigning existing resources and capabilities (Deng et al., 2020). The company's managers and upper management possess these skills (Teece, 2016). According to Krasnikov and Jayachandran (2008), integrating dynamic capabilities into organizational practices imparts a competitive advantage that may be challenging for rival firms to emulate. Teece (2018) believes that capabilities such as entrepreneurial orientation, learning, market and export orientations, export knowledge, and access to finance fit well with the dynamic capability view. Therefore, the variables identified by Teece (2018) are anticipated to influence the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria in the present study.

Export Performance

The performance of small and medium businesses is vital because of their substantial contribution to global economic growth. According to previous literature, diversification into the global market is essential to ensure performance (Haddoud et al., 2021). Exporting is a gradual process that enables small and medium enterprises to establish an international presence (Ferreras-Méndez et al., 2019). Hence, the development of SMEs is critical to inclusive globalization and progress because they account for approximately 95 percent of all enterprises worldwide (Bayraktar & Algan, 2019; Yanti et al., 2022). Equally, governments are increasing their efforts to encourage and support SME expansion as part of national development (Bayraktar & Algan, 2019). Therefore, export performance implies achieving a company's strategic goals in the export market (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994).

Despite its importance, there is a lack of agreement on the construct's measurements, and the available research is fragmented and varies from market to market and nation to nation (Gera, 2019; Zou & Stan, 1998). Consequently, the available literature indicates the absence of

a constant measure of export performance (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Shoham, 1998). Conversely, it is equally imperative to recognize that a firm's export performance depends on the unique situation of each specific setting and must be considered based on the particular goals of the setting (Aaby & Slater, 1989; Madsen & Moen, 2018; Shoham, 1998). According to earlier studies, the debate over the most effective ways to evaluate business performance remains unresolved (Bature & Sallehuddin, 2018). Therefore, the generalization of the findings of various studies conducted in distinct marketplaces is constrained.

Furthermore, a thorough literature review has shown that export performance indicators can be categorized into subjective measures, which include non-financial, financial, and objective measures (Basah, 2019). According to Sousa (2004), concepts that necessitate perceptual or attitudinal input are considered subjective, whereas indicators primarily based on absolute numerical values are classified as objective. Both measures are important in assessing export performance due to their advantages and complementary nature; thus, they are applied extensively in research. In other words, there are a number of reasons why scholars are more likely to employ subjective metrics than objective ones. Nakos et al. (1998) have pointed out that has been a lack of precise information about export financial reports, businesses' reluctance to disclose absolute values, and difficulty in obtaining financial export performance data. As a result, it is widely acknowledged that export performance is multifaceted and that it can be conceptualized and operationalized in a variety of ways because of the diverse performance dimensions that are highlighted by various ad hoc assessment methods (Sousa, 2004; Zou & Stan, 1998). Consequently, this research will adopt subjective metrics in order to investigate their impact on a firm's performance since this approach has greater validity when assessing the long-term aspects of the export performance of firms (Sousa, 2004).

Entrepreneurial Orientation

An organization's ability to identify and seize market possibilities as an organizing principle of the business is referred to as having an entrepreneurial orientation (EO) (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). The construct also serves as an intervening factor in SME growth studies, thus providing a competitive edge that helps firms accomplish excellent export performance (Ahmad et al., 2023; Wolff et al., 2015).

Also, Baker and Sinkula (2009) have empirically proved the positive influence of an EO on firm profitability and performance. However, exporting is a high-risk undertaking for SMEs, and therefore, calls for a strong EO. As a result, an EO allows businesses to affect the market and market behaviors by making available innovative products capable of meeting the needs of export customers (Boso et al., 2012). Ahmed et al.'s (2023) study seemed to suggest that SMEs' propensity for taking calculated risks and their proactive pursuit of global opportunities are essential components of sustained overseas performance. Thus, entrepreneurial orientation is essential in ensuring innovative strategies that lead to the increased performance of a firm (Monteiro et al., 2017). Consistent with the arguments presented above, it was hypothesized that:

H1: Entrepreneurial orientation can impact the performance SMEs in Nigeria

Market Orientation

Furthermore, the adoption of the marketing concept as a corporate philosophy is linked to market orientation (MO). In this sense, an organizational culture consisting of a set of values that prioritize the customer's needs to achieve long-term profitability is referred to as market orientation (Deshpandé et al., 2012). An alternative definition of a market orientation would be the collection of actions, procedures, and attitudes that result from putting the marketing idea into practice (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Market orientation implies how firms consider customer and rival intelligence in their strategic market planning (Baker & Sinkula, 2009). Also, understanding customers and the market, as well as the ability to marshal resources, is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of MO (Baker & Sinkula, 2009). Hence, MO strategy is one of the significant predictors of export performance. Accordingly, it was established that the construct significantly increases the profitability of SMEs (Baker & Sinkula, 2009) and a strong connection between market orientation and performance has been established (Gonzalez-Benito et al., 2009). Likewise, the study by Falahat et al. (2020) reveals that market intelligence is a crucial capability that enhances exporting firms' competitive advantage. MO will, therefore, be a deciding element in the company's success. In line with the statements above, the following hypothesis was formed.

H2: Market orientation positively affects the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria

Learning Orientation

Learning orientation (LO) refers to a firm's orientation that stresses learning as a regular practice (Baker & Sinkula, 1999). LO implies business procedures and the use of innovative knowledge to improve performance (Kosgei & Loice, 2015; Slater & Narver, 1995). Sinkula et al. (1997) assert that there is a connection between LO and organizational values that support knowledge accumulation. Similarly, LO helps businesses unlearn outmoded market knowledge by challenging the present firm's learning tradition that may have resulted in skewed learning procedures and substituting them with fresh viewpoints, approaches, and methods (Baker & Sinkula, 2009). Thus, effective managers often develop various internal and external sources to obtain reliable information about their companies and surroundings (Slater & Narver, 1995). Additionally, shared visions that focus on the enthusiasm of the organizational staff for enhancing customer value drive enterprises that want to grow (Fang et al., 2014; Slater & Narver, 1995). Consequently, Segarra-Blasco et al. (2020) have contended that learning through export procedures is essential for encouraging firms to offer their products overseas. Likewise, Wolff et al. (2015) suggest that learning is a crucial element that makes opportunity recognition easier. LO is, therefore, a key factor influencing export performance. Based on the arguments above, it was hypothesized that:

H3: Learning orientation has a positive effect on the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria

Export Orientation

Export orientation signifies a firm's inclination to exploit market opportunities using the necessary resources (Okpara & Koumbiadis, 2011). Export orientation is essential because it enables management to recognize opportunities unique to a market they know (Johanson & Martin, 2015). It allows businesses to lessen the rate of uncertainty and unfamiliarity in the global market, thus increasing their commitment (Akbar et al., 2018). Export orientation is, therefore, essential, and SMEs that have it will probably succeed better than start-ups (Aaby &

Slater, 1989; Eliasson et al., 2012; Kazemi et al., 2023). Accordingly, Acikdilli et al. (2020), Bagheri et al. (2019), and Harrison and Pooe (2022) show that SMEs perform much better abroad when they possess an export orientation. Consequently, managers with a greater degree of this attitude exhibit improved growth in the export market (Moen et al., 2016). Therefore, to shed light on this link regarding SMEs in developing nations, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H4: Export orientation positively influences SME export performance in Nigeria

Access to Finance

It has been stated that having access to resources is one of the most important factors in improving business performance (Fowowe, 2017). Finance deals with the situation where companies require funding from various sources in order to boost performance (Turyakira et al., 2019). An organization's availability and use of different financial instruments can be considered access to finance (Kuntchev et al., 2013). Due to its importance, particularly for SMEs, a plethora of literature has extensively examined access to finance. Finance availability is essential for business growth and expansion abroad (Ahmad et al., 2023; Fatoki & Asah, 2011; OECD, 2018; Temiz et al., 2015). In most cases, export activities are executed on a credit basis, and the firm must wait for payment after goods are dispatched, thus requiring funding to meet the demands of their overseas customers (Kawas, 1997). Therefore, access to funds serves as a springboard for firms to flourish and compete advantageously in the cross-border market (Griffith, 2011). According to scholars, having access to financing promotes SME expansion and exports (Okello et al., 2017; Sibanda et al., 2018). Also, Fowowe's (2017) findings have shown that businesses without credit constraints expand more quickly.

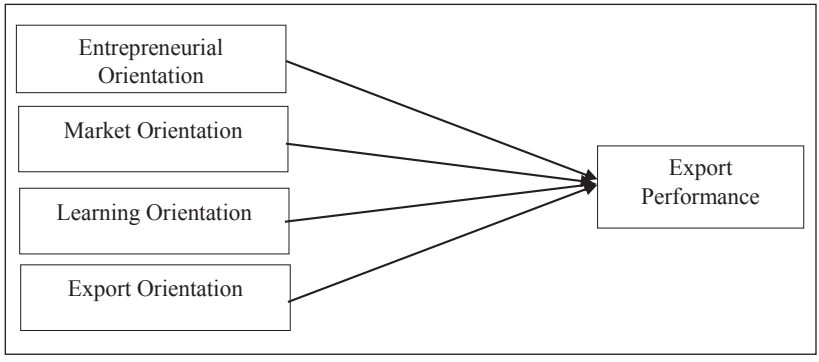
Export Knowledge

The literature has extensively established the significance of knowledge-based resources in the internationalization of a company (Ainuddin et al., 2007). Understanding international markets affects a business's global capacity and desire to grow (Love et al., 2016). Additionally, by comprehending overseas markets, companies can more effectively adjust to requirements from cross-border markets,

leading to even more successful outcomes (Mejri et al., 2018; Villar et al., 2014). Similarly, knowledge of the market, procedures, and laws governing exports is known as export knowledge (Shamsuddoha & Yunus, 2006; Wang & Olsen, 2002). Export knowledge provides an exporter with information regarding how to market his product, market trends, customers' demands, and the observance of the rules of engagement (Belich & Dubinsky, 1995; Gera, 2019). Export knowledge, a crucial prerequisite for exporting operations (Gera, 2019; Shamsuddoha & Yunus, 2006), makes it possible to promote effective export performance. Ahmad et al. (2023) have established that export knowledge acquisition can improve the international performance of SMEs, thus implying that enterprises can succeed in international operations by understanding foreign markets. Likewise, Abubakari et al.'s (2021) analysis has found that export knowledge would enhance the export performance of the firm. As a result, one of the critical resources for a company that determines its success and performance abroad is export knowledge.

Figure 1

Research Model



After reviewing the pertinent literature to investigate the export performance measures of SMEs in Nigeria, the current study has developed a research model, as is depicted in Figure 1. The variables for the study included the following: entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, learning, market, and export. The model was created using the Dynamic Capability View (DCV) to explain the variables under review. According to the suggested framework, the independent variables were expected to predict the dependent variable.

METHODOLOGY

This study has adopted a quantitative technique to validate and assess factors that drive SMEs' export performance in Nigeria. Given the lack of knowledge in the literature regarding the factors influencing the export performance of SMEs, particularly in developing nations such as Nigeria, this approach was appropriate for the present study (Haddoud et al., 2021; Kahiya, 2018; Zahoor et al., 2023). To improve content validity, it has been suggested that researchers should use previously validated items (Straub & Gefen, 2004). As a result, the study's variables and measurements had good psychometric qualities and were taken from earlier research studies. For instance, entrepreneurial orientation (EO) was adapted as a unidimensional construct using 11 items from Soininen et al. (2013) and Acosta et al. (2018). These measurements originated from presentations by Lumpkin and Dess (1996) and Covin and Slevin (1990). Studies by Soininen et al. (2013) and Acosta et al. (2018) determined the construct's Cronbach's alpha to be 0.85 and 0.93, respectively. Market orientation (MO), using 12 items, was originally derived from Narver and Slater (1990) and adapted from Baker and Sinkula (2009) and Gonzalez-Benito et al. (2009). According to empirical analysis conducted by Gonzalez-Benito et al. (2009) and Baker and Sinkula (2009), these measures demonstrated strong psychometric properties with values of 0.939 and 0.88, respectively. Learning orientation (LO) was adapted from Wolff et al. (2015) and Huang and Li (2017), with 13 items as a unidimensional construct. The initial versions of these items were based on Sinkula et al. (1997) and Baker and Sinkula (1999) and had good psychometric attributes. These items have good Cronbach's alpha values of 0.95 and 0.92, respectively (Huang & Li, 2017; Wolff et al., 2015). Export orientation (EXPO) was adapted with six items from Bagheri et al. (2019), Okpara (2009) and Mesquita and Lazzarini (2008). It was discovered that the items were widely used and exhibited strong psychometric qualities (Bagheri et al., 2019; Okpara, 2009). Access to finance (AF) was adapted from Martin et al. (2007) using eight items. Previous research has also confirmed the good psychometric properties of this measurement (Ibrahim & Shariff, 2016). Export Knowledge (EK) was adapted from Shamsuddoha and Yunus (2006) and Wang and Olsen (2002) using eight items. At the same time, the five-item subjective export performance measure was adapted from Wang and Olsen's (2002) empirical study, which discovered that the construct's Cronbach's alpha value was 0.92.

The export market literature extensively uses these metrics (Jin & Cho, 2018; Nakos et al., 1998; Yan et al., 2017). Furthermore, small business owners and managers have often been reluctant to divulge sensitive financial information, making it challenging to acquire data on objective performance (Nakos et al., 1998; Yan et al., 2017). A seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (1 to 7) was used to estimate all the variables. This scale was chosen because it can accurately assess opinions, perceptions, and beliefs (Sekeran, 2003). The scale offers more options, which increases the possibility of obtaining the respondent's objective reality because it prevents him from skewing in one direction (Schuman et al., 1981; Sekeran, 2003).

Population of the Study

According to Salkind (2012), a population is a group of possible participants with specific traits from which a researcher can conduct research and make inferences. When selecting the sample, it is with a framework that enumerates every population characteristic. The study focuses on Nigerian small and medium-sized exporting businesses (SMEs) registered with the Nigeria Export Promotion Council (NEPC). To export their goods, SMEs in Nigeria must register with the NEPC. Consequently, a total of 1,966 SMEs were identified to be the research population using the NEPC database.

However, the SMEs (units of analysis) were chosen based on satisfying specific requirements to obtain accurate data. The stipulation that businesses must be SMEs and actively engage in export operations is an inclusive benchmark for the general public. Certain businesses, like nano- or micro-enterprises, were excluded from the study since they catered solely to the local market. The respondents in this study were the owners and managers of export SMEs because they were more conversant with export protocols and had enough knowledge of export activities.

Sample Size and Technique

One thousand one hundred and ninety-three (1193) SMEs that engaged in export comprised the current study's population, and a sample size of 300 respondents was estimated (Yamane, 1967). A relatively bigger sample size is preferred to reflect the complete population and

produce accurate results accurately. This is because a smaller sample size increases the likelihood of sampling error. According to Salkind (2012), larger sample sizes would result in more precise mean values, enhanced analysis confidence, and a lower rate of uncertainty, all of which would raise mean precision. Consequently, the sampling was later increased to 450 percent to minimize non-response, sampling error, and missing value concerns (Salkind, 2012). This is consistent with the response challenges in the present study's setting (Mahmoud et al., 2022).

Similarly, the convenience sampling technique was used in this research because of its convenience benefits and flexibility; a thoroughly managed non-probability methodology might produce effective results. Thus, choosing one sampling method over another has no bearing on the quality of a study (Memon et al., 2017). In convenience sampling, researchers collect data based on availability and accessibility (Memon et al., 2017). Additionally, numerous research projects involving human subjects do not use random samples, as noted by Polit and Beck (2010). While probability sampling techniques have long been considered the gold standard in research, many social science studies—especially fieldwork research—have employed non-probability sampling (Memon et al., 2017; Rowley, 2014). Because of its convenience benefits and flexibility, a thoroughly managed non-probability methodology may produce effective results. Thus, choosing one sampling method over another has no bearing on the quality of a study (Memon et al., 2017). Thus, non-probability sampling has been used in academic research because of its affordability and convenience (Sarstedt et al., 2017).

Moreover, in research involving diverse and dispersed populations, obtaining a 100 percent response rate remains a significant challenge, even if an adequate sampling frame is available to use probability sampling (Rowley, 2014). Therefore, convenience sampling was employed in this study as a non-probability technique because of its flexibility and advantages among the SMEs engaged in export activities in the study population. It was also based on the accessibility and the potential informants' willingness to complete the questionnaire. Moreover, the technique is linked to a higher number of returned questionnaires. Therefore, of the 450 questionnaires distributed, 323 (71.7%) were returned, from which 278 (61.7%) responses were kept for further analysis.

Method of Data Collection

The questionnaire survey approach was adopted as an appropriate mechanism for data collection. It was used to assess the variables under review because it required gathering data from owners and managers of SMEs engaged in export activities in Nigeria. Administering questionnaires face-to-face has the advantage of making it easier for researchers to elicit responses and obtaining accurate data from a large number of respondents (Rowley, 2014). It will, therefore, ensure that the non-response bias has no impact on the result. Additionally, the drop-and-pick method for gathering data was applied as it was found to be suitable for SME owners and managers in the Nigerian context. Moreover, it was found that the technique would generate a greater response rate than other means of data collection (Ibeh, 2003).

As a result, it was necessary to begin the second research stage, which involved gathering data from the respondents. Four hundred and fifty (450) Nigerian SMEs engaged in export activities were given questionnaires. A few research assistants had helped to distribute the questionnaire to the SME owners. However, the responses were poor, and there was no response on the Google Form of the study a few months after the surveys were initially distributed. Nonetheless, the small data collected in the first few months was utilized for a pilot analysis.

However, due to COVID-19 protocols and the resultant economic instability, many SMEs were forced to close, and several locations became inaccessible. This has led to a fragmented data collection process. This grave problem meant that the data collection had to cease. Despite this set back, the researchers still wanted to ensure they got enough responses, so the process of data collection was extended.

Additionally, extra effort was put into collecting and distributing the questionnaires to stimulate responses. This attempt yielded a response of 322 valid surveys after months of effort. In particular, the Small and Medium Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) and the Nigerian Export Promotion Council (NEPC) had provided invaluable support in eliciting responses. The researchers also used a personal network of contacts with friends working in relevant areas with exporters to obtain additional information.

Content Validity

Content validity is a process whereby a panel of professionals or a relatively small sample is approached to make their observations concerning the appropriateness of the selected measurements (Hair et al., 2019). According to Lynn (1986), three to ten experts must ascertain whether the content is valid. Thus, five experts from three universities and two exporters were consulted and asked to review the items of the present study to establish their validity. Consistent with Hair et al. (2019), these specialists were requested to assess the items and their association with the measured variables. Thus, a few measures were modified based on the feedback from the specialists before the distribution of the study questionnaire so as to ensure that the respondents understood the questions.

Pilot Study

After achieving satisfactory content validity, a pilot study assessed the respondents' grasp of the items and their clarity (Tay et al., 2020). This analysis is paramount before collecting the main data to eliminate ambiguous measures from the questionnaire (Tay et al., 2020). In the pilot, a small sample of the study questionnaire was distributed to the respondents. Therefore, an aggregate of 65 questionnaires, sufficient for empirical assessment (Sekeran, 2003), was conveniently distributed to the owners and managers of SMEs engaged in export activities. Fifty (50) questionnaires were completed and returned, accounting for 76.9 percent. The analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 24. The items were found to be valid and reliable for the study as the Cronbach's coefficients were above 0.7 (See Table 1). Consequently, the constructs were considered appropriate for further examination in the Nigerian context.

Table 1

Pilot Study Findings

Constructs	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Access to finance	8	0.921
Export knowledge	8	0.918
Entrepreneurial orientation	11	0.870
Export performance	5	0.749
Export orientation	6	0.821
Learning orientation	13	0.882
Market orientation	12	0.861

DATA ANALYSIS

Results and Analysis

Table 2

Characteristic of the Respondents

SN	Items	Frequency	Percentage
1	Establishment of the firm		
	5 years and less	60	21.6
	6 – 7 years	126	45.3
	8 – 9 years	39	14
	10 years and above	53	19
2	Type of industry		
	Food and drinks		
	Rubber and gum	14	5
	Manufacturing	68	24.5
	Solid mineral	65	23.4
	Agriculture	25	8.9
		106	38.1
3	The number of employees in your company		
	10 – 49	188	67.6
	50 – 199	90	32.4
4	For how long has your company exported goods? Less than 1 year	1	0.4
	1 -2 years	28	10.1
	3 – 5 years	120	43.2
	6 – 10 years	106	38
	More than 10 years	23	8.3

(continued)

SN	Items	Frequency	Percentage
5	Indicate the number of countries that your company exports to.		
	1 country	15	5.4
	2 – 3 countries	155	55.8
	4 – 6 countries	90	32.4
	7 – 10 countries	17	6
	11 countries and above	1	0.4
6	Which of these regions does your business export to?		
	Africa	94	33.8
	America	46	16.5
	Asia Pacific	77	27.7
	Europe	61	21.9
7	Describe your role within the organization		
	Owner	181	65.1
	Manager	97	34.9

The study's respondents comprise the owners and managers of SMEs that export their goods. According to the participant profile, 21.6 percent of the SMEs were initiated within the first five years, 45.3 percent within the sixth and seventh years, and 14 percent within the eighth and ninth years. Furthermore, 19 percent of the SMEs had operated for over ten years. Similarly, 5 percent of the respondents work in the food and beverage sector, 24.5 percent in the rubber and gum industry, 23.4 percent in manufacturing, 9 percent in solid minerals, and 38.1 percent in agriculture. Next, 67.6 percent of SMEs had 49 employees or fewer, and 32.4 percent had 50–199 employees. Regarding export experience, 0.4 percent of SMEs had a one-year experience, 10.1 percent for one to two years, 43.2 percent for three to five years, 38 percent for six to ten years, and 8.3 percent for more than ten years. Additionally, 5.4 percent of SMEs export to one country, 55.8 percent to two to three countries, 32.4 percent to four to six countries, 6 percent to seven to ten countries, and 0.4 percent to more than ten countries. According to the respondents, Africa accounted for 33.8 percent of export destinations, followed by Asia Pacific (22.7%), Europe (21.9%), and America (16.5%). Finally, owners constituted 65.1 percent of the study sample, and managers accounted for 34.9 percent.

Data Screening

Prior to the main data assessment, a preliminary investigation was done to determine whether the data were suitable for a meticulous

study (Aliyu et al., 2016). Similarly, data cleaning allows a researcher to examine the raw data for potential problems and fix them after data collection, before full-scale data analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013; Tay et al., 2020). Therefore, the initial data screening largely determines the quality and importance of a study's findings (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013; Tay et al., 2020). The initial step in the data screening procedure is checking for missing values (Tay et al., 2020).

Missing data is one of the most prevalent issues in data analysis and thus refers to the absence of valid response values on one or more constructs in the data analysis. Missing data occurs due to errors in data gathering, or data entry or when a participant fails to answer one or more questions in a survey (Hair et al., 2019; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Hence, providing information is essential to maximizing confidence in the findings. According to Hair et al. (2019), a variable with up to 50 percent or beyond missing data should be removed so long as a sufficient sample is attained. Considering the importance of missing values in any data analysis, precautionary measures were taken in this study to ensure that the data was devoid of missing values.

Similarly, assessing missing values is imperative because PLS-SEM cannot run an analysis with missing data. Upon receipt of the questionnaire, the researcher checked the questions to confirm they were answered correctly. This step is essential, as it substantially helps ensure this analysis is free of missing values. As mentioned earlier SPSS (v24) was used to analyze the data collected and preliminary descriptive statistics were run to determine whether or not missing data existed. The outcomes of the descriptive statistics suggested the absence of missing values. Hence, the issue of deleting any response did not arise.

The next step is the reverse coding of the negatively worded measures. Using the SPSS (v24) transformation function, the responses for all measures were reversed for Export orientation 3 (EXPO3), Export orientation 4 (EXPO4), Entrepreneurial orientation (EO9), Entrepreneurial orientation 11 (EO11), and Access to finance 8 (AF8) to ensure that all measures fell under the same classification of variables in the questionnaire (Tay et al., 2020).

Another critical step of data screening is the assessment and management of outliers. Outliers are observations in a data set whose

replies differ noticeably from the bulk of the responses; their presence skews statistical analysis (Hair et al., 2019). One can identify univariate outliers by employing descriptive statistics to examine the Z-score of the observations (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Any Z-score value higher than 4.00 is a potential outlier and should be removed (Hair et al., 2019). Therefore, 45 cases of univariate outliers were found in this study.

Furthermore, Mahanalobis distance (D^2) was employed to identify and examine multivariate outlying cases, as proposed by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013). The process is to run Mahalanobis in SPSS (v24) and compare the values with those of Chi-square values. All observations with D^2 values larger than 83.675 (for 64 items) at 0.05 degree of freedom must be deleted. However, no multivariate outliers were found in this study. Consequently, the remaining 278 data were considered for subsequent analysis.

The fourth stage is the normality test. A normality test is necessary to conduct a multivariate data analysis; the essence is to certify that the outcomes are valid, reliable, and accurate (Hair et al., 2019). Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) argued that satisfying the basis assumption of the regression analysis hinged on the normally distributed data. Normality can be assessed statistically or graphically, and the fundamental components of normality are skewness and kurtosis. Hair et al. (2010) and Byrne (2010) advocated that data is normal if the skewness ranges between ±2 and the kurtosis value is between ±7 and is thus acceptable. Consistent with the skewness and kurtosis values in this analysis, the data can be referred to as approximately normal. For instance, the skewness and kurtosis of the whole items are within the cut-off values of < 2 and <7, respectively. In other words, this study's skewness and kurtosis values were less than 2 and 7.

According to Hair et al. (2019), the homoscedasticity analysis is also linked to the assumption of normality, which states that the distribution of the values of the outcome variable is relatively equal at every value of the predictor construct (Hair et al., 2019). Subsequently, the relationship among the constructs would be assumed to be homoscedastic when the data was normally dispersed, in sum no evidence of heteroscedasticity was found (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Because normality was achieved in this study, it could be established

that homoscedasticity and the absence of heteroscedasticity were equally assumed to be achieved.

Non-Response Bias Test

Non-response bias refers to the mistake a scholar is anticipated to commit while evaluating the sample attributes. This is because some kinds of respondents may be underrepresented due to non-response (Alkerwi et al., 2010; Berg, 2005). Literature asserts that there is no threshold response rate lower than a survey assessment, which is inevitably biased, and, on the contrary, no response level higher than it is never biased (Singer, 2006). Nevertheless, regardless of the size of the response, there is a potential bias due to the loss of information that must be investigated (Alkerwi et al., 2010; Sheikh & Mattingly, 1981). For this reason, this argument makes it necessary to conduct the non-response bias analysis for the current study.

The present study has categorized the respondents into early and late response groups in relation to the seven constructs under investigation. Those responses garnered in the earlier months of the data collection were categorized as early responses, whereas those received afterward were classified as late responses. The study compared the responses to the distributed questionnaires collected earlier with those received later and had determined whether significant differences existed. Looking at Table 3, it is evident that the range mean and standard deviation for early and late responses were different. The two-tailed t-test result (Table 3) revealed the absence of significant differences regarding the early and late responses despite the fragmented data collection procedures based on entrepreneurial orientation (t -.157, $p < .875$), market orientation (t -.050, $p < .960$), learning orientation (t -.1.181, $p < .238$), export orientation (t -.855, $p < .393$), access to finance (t -.878, $p < .381$), export knowledge (t -.1.070, $p<.285$), and export performance (t -.1.022, $p < .308$). Consequently, according to the t-test results, it can be ascertained that there was less dissimilarity between the early and late participants, signifying that the data was free from non-response bias issues, i.e., the assumption of homogeneity of variance of Levene's test had been achieved (Table 3).

Table 3

T- test for Nonresponse Bias

Variables	Responses	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sign
Entrepreneurial orientation	Early Response	180	5.5616	95274	-.157	.875
	Late Response	98	5.5798	.85843		
Market orientation	Early Response	180	5.8014	.77191	-.050	.960
	Late Response	98	5.8061	.70617		
Learning orientation	Early Response	180	5.7248	.80452	-.1.181	.238
	Late Response	98	5.8359	.63554		
Export orientation	Early Response	180	6.3704	.40503	-.855	.393
	Late Response	98	6.4133	.38902		
Access to finance	Early Response	180	5.8257	.72509	-.878	.381
	Late Response	98	5.9043	.69093		
Export knowledge	Early Response	180	6.2806	.49889	-.1.070	.285
	Late Response	98	6.3469	.48480		
Export performance	Early Response	180	5.9789	.81645	-.1.022	.308
	Late Response	98	6.0816	.77104		

Multicollinearity

Multicollinearity refers to the extent to which two or more highly interrelated predictor variables (Sekeran & Bougie, 2016). This problem has a tremendous effect on the outcome of regression analysis; consequently, it can simply be examined by identifying the correlation matrix for the independent explanatory variables (Hair et al., 2019; Sekeran & Bougie, 2016). Multicollinearity can also be assessed through tolerance and its inverse variance inflator factor (VIF) values (Sekeran & Bougie, 2016). In order to assess multicollinearity, the VIF and tolerance levels were analyzed using regression outcomes from SPSS (v24). Accordingly, a VIF value above 10 and a tolerance value below 0.1 denote a multicollinearity problem (Hair et al., 2014). Table 4 demonstrates the VIF and the tolerance values of the independent variables.

Table 4

Tolerance and VIF Values

Independent variables	Tolerance	VIF
Entrepreneurial orientation	.415	2.412
Market orientation	.430	2.324
Learning orientation	.581	1.721
Export orientation	.931	1.074
Export knowledge	.980	1.021
Access to finance	.544	1.840

Consistent with Table 4, no evidence of multicollinearity was detected in the entire case because the tolerance values (0.415 – 0.980) were greater than 0.1 and the VIF (ranges between 1.021-2.412) was less than 10, respectively. Therefore, it could be concluded that no multicollinearity existed among all the exogenous constructs under review.

Internal Consistency

Internal consistency estimates the extent to which test items are interconnected, i.e., the entire items measure the same concept (Hair et al., 2017). Inter-item internal consistency was measured using the composite reliability (CR) metric (Hair et al., 2020; Peterson & Kim, 2013). The CR spans between 0 and 1; the higher score shows a higher level of reliability; therefore, any variable with composite reliability up to 0.70 and beyond signifies adequate reliability (Hair et al., 2020). Consequently, it was demonstrated that the study's variables had acceptable reliability scores (Table 5).

Validity Test

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity denotes the degree to which an item to measure a similar variable interrelates positively (Hair et al., 2017). Average variance extraction (AVE) was used in the present study to evaluate the convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017; Tay et al., 2020). Achieving sufficient convergent validity requires that the threshold value of AVE for each variable be >0.5. The AVE is derived by averaging the

indicator reliability of a variable (Hair et al., 2020). To get a minimum of 0.5 AVE, the following four items—AF1, EXPO1, EXPO2, and LO13—were taken out of the 64 questionnaire measures. Finally, satisfactory convergent validity was achieved for all constructs above the recommended values (See Table 5).

Table 5

Reliability Coefficients and Average Variance Extracted

Variables	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extraction (AVE)
Entrepreneurial orientation	0.939	0.586
Market orientation	0.939	0.560
Learning orientation	0.927	0.514
Export orientation	0.852	0.592
Export knowledge	0.918	0.585
Access to finance	0.902	0.570
Export performance	0.924	0.709

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity is the extent to which a construct is genuinely distinct from other variables by empirical standards. Therefore, proving discriminant validity means a construct is unique and describes things other constructs in the model do not. Traditionally, discriminant validity denotes the uniqueness of a variable; it measures how significantly a given latent variable differs from other variables (Hair et al., 2017). The heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was the recent benchmark for examining discriminant validity; for this reason, it can be evaluated by comparing the HTMT of the constructs under examination (Benitez et al., 2020; Henseler et al., 2015). Similarly, the acceptable values for interpreting HTMT results should be less than 0.85 but can be more than 0.90 (Hair et al., 2020; Henseler et al., 2015). Table 6 illustrates the HTMT result; all values were below the threshold, showing a satisfactory level of discriminant validity.

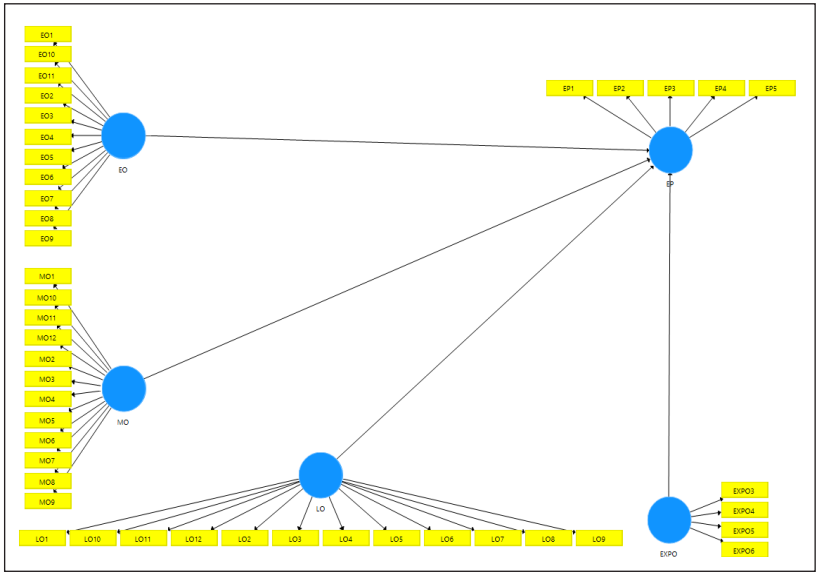
Table 6

Discriminant Analysis- Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Results

Constructs	AF	EK	EO	EP	EXPO	LO	MO
AF							
EK	0.087						
EO	0.680	0.070					
EP	0.658	0.077	0.678				
EXPO	0.090	0.070	0.130	0.176			
LO	0.503	0.119	0.655	0.585	0.081		
MO	0.697	0.072	0.741	0.669	0.100	0.619	

Figure 2

Bootstrapping Results for a Direct Relationship



Testing hypotheses, or determining the path coefficient that best explains the strength of the relationship between exogenous and endogenous variables, is the final stage of the structural model. Hair et al. (2011) has recommended that 5,000 resampling procedures be used in the present study. The model's bootstrapping result and structural path coefficients are as displayed in Table 7.

Table 7

Results of the Direct Relationship Analysis

Hypothesized paths	βeta	Std. error	T value	P-value	Decision
EO -> EP	0.293	0.073	4.003	0.000	Supported
EXPO -> EP	0.094	0.039	2.395	0.008	Supported
LO -> EP	0.183	0.057	3.221	0.001	Supported
MO -> EP	0.300	0.077	3.882	0.000	Supported

Note. p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

EO = Entrepreneurial Orientation, EXPO = Export Orientation, LO = Learning Orientation, MO = Market Orientation.

According to the results of the hypothesis testing as displayed in Table 7, EO greatly enhanced the export performance of the SMEs (β.293; t=4.003; p<.000); as a result, HI is supported. Likewise, MO was predicted by H2 to have a positive relationship with the export performance of the SMEs. The results show that MO significantly improved the export performance of the SMEs (β.300; t=3.882; p<.000), confirming H2. Concerning H3, the results indicate that LO and the export performance of the SMEs were positively and significantly correlated (β.183; t=3.221; p<.001). Similarly, the outcome supports H4 by displaying a positive and significant interaction between EXPO and the export performance of SMEs (β.094; t=2.395; p<.008). Consequently, the four hypotheses stated earlier were all supported.

DISCUSSION

The constructs under investigation, i.e., entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, learning orientation, export orientation, access to finance, export knowledge, and export performance, have received emergent conceptual and empirical interest in the literature on SME internationalization. Nevertheless, no evidence exists to validate the measurements of these constructs in emerging and African nations. Consequently, this study has analyzed the applicability of these variables in Nigeria. Similarly, determining the factors propelling SMEs to engage in export activities in developing economies are uncommon among SMEs, particularly in Nigeria (Haddoud et al.,

2021; Paul, 2020). Albeit, there has been some researchers who have pointed out the urgent need for more research on what makes African small and medium-sized businesses do well when they try to export (Haddoud et al., 2021; Paul, 2020; Zahoor et al., 2020, 2023). Therefore, the present study is a pioneering effort to evaluate EO, MO, LO, EXPO, AF, EK, and EP as antecedents of export performance among exporting SMEs in Nigeria.

Consequently, the present study has been able to bridge the research gap by determining the suitability of the important variables in the context of Nigeria, as most of these variables were developed and tested in the developed world. A preliminary data investigation was carried out to achieve this goal. The outcome of content validity revealed that the construct items had sufficient face validity. A few measures were revised upon advice from the experts, so as to adequately validate the constructs in the Nigerian context. Similarly, a pilot study was conducted, and the results demonstrated higher reliability values above the threshold score. As a result, no single item was removed.

The data also met the criteria for convergent and discriminant validity. For instance, the entire item loading exceeds the acceptable value of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2020), except for Access to finance 1 (AF1), Export orientation 1 (EXPO1), Export orientation 2 (EXPO2), and Learning orientation 13 (LO13), whose values were less than 0.50 and were therefore, deleted (Hair et al., 2017). Similarly, both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability had satisfactory values higher than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2017). Additionally, convergent validity was achieved for every construct (Hair et al., 2020). Consequently, the whole construct items were found to be suitable and valid for further examination in Nigeria.

Accordingly, the study tests the direct relationship between entrepreneurial orientation, market learning orientation, learning orientation, and export orientation. Based on the information provided in Table 7, the four hypothesized associations were found to be significant. For instance, EO significantly improves the export performance of SMEs (β.293; t=4.003; p<.000); hence, HI is supported. Similarly, the findings support H2 by demonstrating that MO greatly enhances SMEs' export performance (β.300; t=3.882; p<.000). Regarding H3, the findings show a significant and positive correlation (β.183; t=3.221; p<.001) between export performance and

LO. Likewise, the result confirms H4 by showing an important and positive interaction between EXPO and SMEs' export performance (β.094; t=2.395; p<.008).

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study theoretically conceptualized the entire research items as unidimensional variables that can be used in the Nigerian environment. Although these constructs were used in the past, most were either used as a single variable or a combination to measure export performance. Similarly, developed countries were the primary focus of most studies on the factors influencing SME export performance (Haddoud et al., 2021; Paul, 2020; Tuominen et al., 2022). Exports are crucial for businesses, especially those in developing nations, as they help them expand from their small local markets (2021).

It is important to state at this juncture that the present study has addressed calls for research into factors influencing the performance of African SMEs' exports (Haddoud et al., 2021; Paul, 2020; Zahoor et al., 2020, 2023). Therefore, painstaking measurement validation consisted of content validity, a pilot test, internal consistency, and convergent and discriminant validity assessments to validate the variables of the research. The findings show that the measurements were internally consistent and valid, allowing researchers and practitioners to use them in the study context. Additionally, the direct relationship between the hypothesized relationship was significant. Consequently, the study will boost the credibility and duplication of subsequent findings in Nigeria and other developing countries, and provide a coherent and efficient testimonial for future scholarly works.

SME owners should consider all the parameters assessed in this study and use them astutely to improve their export market success. For instance, acquiring export knowledge will allow SMEs to understand the rubrics of the export market. Similarly, a firm's entrepreneurial attitude will enable it to actively seek new business opportunities and generate creative products, improving its export performance (Gera, 2019; Felahat et al., 2021). Similarly, financial capability enables the firm to access diverse export markets. On the other hand, firms should stimulate a fertile learning atmosphere. Therefore, businesses need

to understand how strategic factors affect their success. Furthermore, SMEs must comprehend their target market, the strategies of their competitors, and how to effectively address market demands. Thus, it will lead to stability and the long-term survival of their businesses**.**

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has some limitations. First, the study is cross-sectional; thus, further research should use longitudinal data collection procedures. Future studies may reduce this possibility by incorporating the qualitative research method to enhance the rigor of the findings. The model has been conceptualized; in a subsequent research paper, the researcher will examine a comprehensive model that includes export knowledge and financial access as moderator and mediator, respectively. Lastly, micro-enterprises, which constitute a tremendous number, were not captured; this has restricted the generalizability of the present findings. Hence, they should be considered in the future.

CONCLUSION

The present study has collected data from multiple industries, which makes it challenging to determine industry-specific performance. Future studies should focus on a single sector to provide industry-specific information regarding performance. The current study confirms the validity and relevance of the reviewed measurements, making them suitable for use in Nigerian contexts. However, access to finance (F1), Export orientation 1 (EXPO1), Export orientation 2 (EXPO2), and Learning orientation 13 (LO13) were incompatible with the study setting and, hence, dropped due to lower loadings. Consequently, the remaining measurements retained in this analysis imply a slight difference from the original measures of the variables. Accordingly, the items presented in the findings are consistent and valid to apply when trying to understand exporting SMEs in Nigeria.

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