



Exploring the Influence of Export Orientation on Small Firms Performance: The Moderating Role of Export Knowledge

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Abstract

Despite the burgeoning studies on the performance implications of export orientation and export knowledge, our comprehension of how they influence the export performance of SMEs is scarce. This study aims to assess the impact of export orientation on SME export performance in Nigeria through the moderating effect of export knowledge. The research model was evaluated with a sample of 278 Nigerian exporting SMEs using a convenience sampling technique, and a questionnaire was applied for data collection. Partial least square–structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed. The conclusion of the analysis supports the notion that export orientation improves SMEs' export performance in Nigeria. Moreover, export knowledge was found to moderate the association significantly. This finding provides practical insights for industry players on the variables that drive the export performance of SMEs.

Keywords

Export orientation, Export knowledge, Export performance, SMEs, PLS-SEM, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Exporting is of utmost importance, especially for small-scale businesses that dominate any nation's economic activities, whether developed or developing. Recently, several researchers have assessed the export performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Harrison & Poole, 2022; Katikar et al., 2024; Ringo et al., 2023). The superior firm performance suggests better socioeconomic well-being due to increased job opportunities and enhanced revenue (Abubakar, 2022; SMEDAN, 2021). Export development is crucial for both the country and the firms; for the former, exporting is paramount as it boosts economic growth and improves the number of foreign earnings and the import level the nations can afford (Okpara & Kabongo, 2009). Additionally, it expands consumers' access to various products, thus uplifting their quality of life and standard of living (Lages & Montgomery, 2004). As such, SMEs are germane to economic growth in developing economies, albeit they require extended time to internationalize compared to the same firms in advanced economies (Chandra et al., 2020). Consequently, diversification through exporting will pave the way for firms to explore multiple opportunities overseas and reduce overreliance on the local market (Okpara & Kabongo, 2009). Similarly, understanding how internationalization affects a firm's performance results has been noted as an important issue in international business literature (Zahoor et al., 2023). However, some studies have indicated that large firms in developed nations have dominated much research on SMEs' internationalization studies (Haddoud et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2020; Zahoor et al., 2023). Moreover, in developing countries, SMEs are in the limelight, thus becoming an exciting research topic (Chandra et al., 2020; Haddoud et al., 2021; Kahiya, 2018; Njinyah et al., 2023; Ringo et al., 2023).

Despite the extensive research on factors affecting SME export performance in developed economies (Haddoud et al., 2021; Kahiya, 2018; Paul, 2020), our understanding of these models' application in developing countries like Nigeria is limited. In addition, the scholarly work of Chandra et al. (2020), Haddoud et al. (2021), and Zahoor et al. (2023) show that studies on SME export performance antecedents are required, particularly in developing markets like Nigeria. In the same vein, the export performance of Nigerian SMEs is insignificant at less than 10 percent compared to other countries that share similar attributes (Karedza & Govender, 2019; SMEDAN & NBS, 2021). Given the diversity of this literature, there is still much room for further research in this area. Research on moderators has only recently examined the moderators between antecedents and internationalization performance (Felzensztein et al., 2019; Nakos et al., 2019).

Therefore, for SMEs to expand their markets, improving their understanding of the export market through export orientation and knowledge capabilities is essential, as it can serve as a source of competitive advantage (Abubakari et al., 2021; Di Fatta et al., 2019; Harrison & Pooe, 2022; Knox, 2018). Furthermore, studies on SME internationalization in the developing world are underdeveloped and fragmented, underscoring the need for additional quantitative scholarly work (Kahiya, 2018; Zahoor et al., 2020). Also, the need to include a moderating variable in a study that explores the determinants of SMEs' export performance was proposed to observe the magnitude of the association between the exogenous and endogenous variables (Chen et al., 2016; Ringo et al., 2023).

Hence, it is evident that our comprehension of this particular domain is insufficient, indicating a noticeable deficiency in knowledge and emphasizing the necessity to establish a theoretical framework germane to the Nigerian situation. Moreover, the present study is timely and indispensable in the context of Nigeria, as more research on the export performance of SMEs from Sub-Saharan Africa is required to buttress the enactment of a policy framework geared towards the growth of SMEs (NEPC, 2020; SMEDAN, 2021). Furthermore, other developing economies, as they share specific attributes in common, will benefit from the findings of this article in developing and executing policies to drive their SMEs' international performance. Also, this study aimed to bridge this vacuum and provide insights for practitioners and the government, as this kind of empirical study has never been documented in the extant literature. Consequently, the current paper epitomizes a novel contribution because it responds to recommendations for further in-depth research on the factors affecting SMEs' success in emerging economies (Abubakar et al., 2024; Haddoud et al., 2021; Kahiya, 2018; Zahoor et al., 2020, 2023), as concern is deep regarding the lackluster performance of SMEs in Nigeria.

Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the impact of export orientation on export performance among Nigerian exporting SMEs through the moderating role of export knowledge to offer a richer perspective on a critical factor that affects performance. The article seeks to make some contributions. First, we recognize and conceptualize two primary resources as vital to the international triumph of SMEs. Second, we point to export orientation and export knowledge as essential performance drivers. Third, the conceptual and theoretical attributes of the identified variables were developed and validated.

1.1 Research Model and Hypothesis Development

1.1.1 Export Orientation and Performance

Based on the dynamic capability theory, export orientation determines the activities that encourage export behavior, such as market information or sales seeking and partnering with business associates overseas (Bagheri et al., 2019; Okpara, 2009; Shafiee et al., 2022). Familiarization with the rubrics of the export market is essential, as it will enable export managers to gain experience and knowledge to manufacture products that will ultimately enhance their export performance (Bagheri et al., 2019; Knox, 2018). In reality, business operations are influenced by society; therefore, in the case of international business activities, the sociocultural environment plays a leading role (Rahman et al., 2017). Accordingly, Miller (1993) relates that experience may model how firm owners and managers view the universe, allowing them to filter novel business opportunities, blend with rapidly changing external contexts, and build apt strategic responses (Huff, 1990).

Hence, export orientation is when enterprises actively discover novel opportunities in the export market and earmark the desired resources and capabilities for export operations (Boso et al., 2018; Moen et al., 2016). Export orientation improves a firm's decision vis-à-vis export operations as it demonstrates the management decision concerning the disbursement of funds to orchestrate exporting (Sørensen & Madsen, 2012). Thus, a higher export orientation level is an indisputable strategic resource for successful exporting activities (Birru et al., 2019). For instance, Moen et al. (2016) and Zou and Stan (1998), assert that export orientation is one of the most crucial success components of international ventures for SMEs. As such, it has been established that the concept is a consistent export performance predictor (Zou & Stan, 1998).

In addition, Kaleka (2012) established that export orientation is a dynamic capability that improves export performance. It is among the strategic orientations SMEs need to utilize to accomplish outstanding export market success (Bagheri et al., 2019; Castilla-Polo & Sanchez-Hernandez, 2022; Okpara, 2009). Examining export orientation as an export performance antecedent for SMEs creates an avenue to allow the firm to develop an effective model capable of explaining the accurate association between the orientation in question and performance (Akyol & Akehurst, 2003). Empirically, Okpara (2009) reported that firms with a proactive export orientation performed better than those with a conventional orientation in terms of superior performance, profitability, and growth. Similarly, Okpara and Koumbiadis (2011) established that managers with higher export orientation participated more in export operations than those without the orientation.

Furthermore, Ali et al. (2018) and Bagheri et al. (2019) findings imply that export orientation has improved the export performance of SMEs. Likewise, Filatotchev et al. (2009) ascertained that export orientation and firm performance are positively linked. Again, Harrison and Pooe's (2022) recent investigation found that export orientation affects the performance of SMEs in the export market. Also, export orientation, such as experiences possessed abroad by firm founders, plays a crucial role in determining the success of founders or SMEs in the overseas market (Filatotchev et al., 2009). In the light of this, the following hypothesis was established.

H1: *There is a positive relationship between export orientation and the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria.*

1.1.2 Export Knowledge and Performance

Knowledge has been acknowledged as a critical resource that can be managed to strengthen a firm's competitive advantage and improve its performance (Boateng et al., 2023; Temiz et al., 2015). Specifically, foreign market norms, values, rules, and regulations are imperative for exporting. Business operations are established to meet the requirements of their target markets, whereas people's preferences are consistent with their social and cultural aspects (Rahman et al., 2017). In exporting, the role of the social and cultural environment is more prevalent (Rahman et al., 2017). By establishing business ventures overseas, enterprises interact with diverse cultures and societies (Rahman et al., 2017). Thus, export knowledge is critical as it allows SME owners/managers to be the architects of their firms' future. In addition, it enables them to identify export market opportunities and the subsequent deployment of resources to exploit the already detected opportunities in the overseas market (Stoian et al., 2018). It has also been recognized that export knowledge is a fundamental component that can stimulate export performance and productivity (Aaby & Slater, 1989; Abubakar et al., 2024; Sami & Abdallah, 2022). Consequently, export knowledge refers to the enterprise's capacity to export (Di Fatta et al., 2019).

According to Stoian et al. (2018), the market diversification of SMEs is purely driven by knowledge of the overseas market. Knowledge of the export market may emanate from the global network (Laufs & Schwens, 2014). Recent findings suggest that understanding the export market drives the international performance of SMEs (Abubakari et al., 2021; Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2022). Similarly, Di Fatta et al. (2019) and Gera (2019) studies reveal that export knowledge affects SMEs' export performance. Wang and Olsen (2002) pinpointed export market knowledge and exporting processes as having a significant influence on the export success of the firm. They asserted that knowledge related to a firm's export marketing expertise enhances export performance. These outcomes, taken together, make it evident that knowledge and expertise are crucial for competing in the export market. Consistent with the past results and the outcome of the literature review, the following hypothesis was stated.

H2: *Export knowledge moderates the relationship between export orientation and export performance of SMEs in Nigeria.*

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Sampling Technique

The current study's population comprises all the exporting SMEs operating in Nigeria, and the data was generated from these firms. A database of 1196 SME exporters registered with the Nigerian Export Promotion Council was compiled. A total of 450 questionnaires were disbursed using the convenience sampling technique since a substantial number of researchers in social sciences that used human beings as subjects applied it. Similarly, the method is ideal for fieldwork research and when human subjects are participants (Memon et al., 2017; Polit & Beck, 2010; Sarstedt et al., 2017). After several follow-ups and reminders, 322 questionnaires were successfully retrieved, and 45 were not fit for further analysis and, thus, rejected due to issues such as missing values and outliers. Consequently, 278 (representing 62 %) responses were utilized for data estimation. Likewise, a requirement was established for selecting the participating companies, stating that they had to be SMEs engaged in exporting. Therefore, all the SMEs involved were privately owned and had export experience, and the respondents were owners/managers of exporting SMEs.

2.2 Measures

As recommended by the authors, this study adapted measures from the previous studies. In measuring export performance, items were adapted from Wang and Olsen (2002), and export orientation items were derived from Bagheri et al. (2019), Okpara (2009), and Mesquita and Lazzarini (2008). While the author's adapted items for export knowledge from Shamsuddoha and Yunus (2006) and Wang and Olsen (2002). These items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

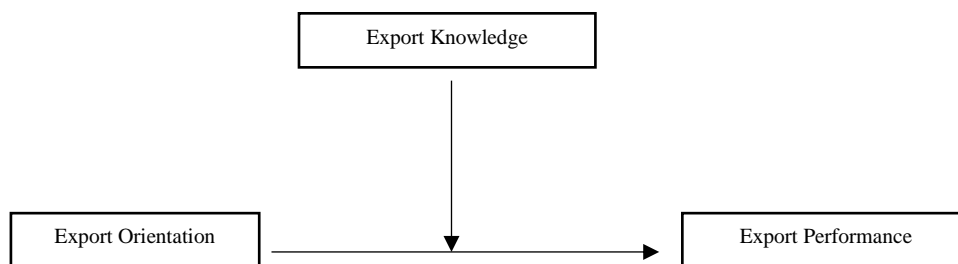


Fig. 1 Research Framework

2.3 Data Estimation Techniques

The data garnered in this research was examined using partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Similarly, the study utilizes the two-step approach to SEM, as Chin (1998) suggested, to estimate the SEM models. The authors first conducted model validation through reliability and validity and then proceeded with structural model assessment. PLS-SEM was appropriate in the current study since the approach is less restrictive on residual distributions and multivariate normality assumptions than the rest of the estimation tools, like the covariance approach to SEM (Chin, 1998). Similarly, PLS-SEM is desired if the research aims to understand the outcome variable through prediction (Henseler et al., 2009).

3. Findings and Analysis

3.1 Assessment of Measurement Model

Model validation was conducted using a measurement model to assess reliability and convergent and discriminant validity (Aliyu et al., 2018; Ringo et al., 2023). Composite reliability (CR) was utilized to evaluate the measurement model. The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that the entire construct score met the cut-off values of greater than 0.70, as endorsed by Hair et al. (2019). In estimating convergent validity, the standard is that average variance extracted (AVE) should be applied, and all variables' values must be above 0.5 (Henseler et al., 2015). Thus, evidence for satisfying this requirement is seen in Table I. Consequently, it has been established that the measurement model demonstrates adequate reliability and convergent and discriminant validity.

Table I Measurement model validity and reliability

Constructs	Items	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Export performance	EP1	0.790	0.925	0.713
	EP2	0.856		
	EP3	0.870		
	EP4	0.868		
	EP5	0.835		
Export knowledge	EK1	0.751	0.924	0.604
	EK2	0.755		
	EK3	0.767		
	EK4	0.647		
	EK5	0.814		
	EK6	0.768		
	EK7	0.838		
	EK8	0.858		
Export orientation	EXPO1	0.830	0.908	0.624
	EXPO2	0.825		
	EXPO3	0.848		
	EXPO4	0.802		
	EXPO5	0.790		
	EXPO6	0.622		

Note(s): EP – Export performance; EK – Export Knowledge; EXPO – Export orientation CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

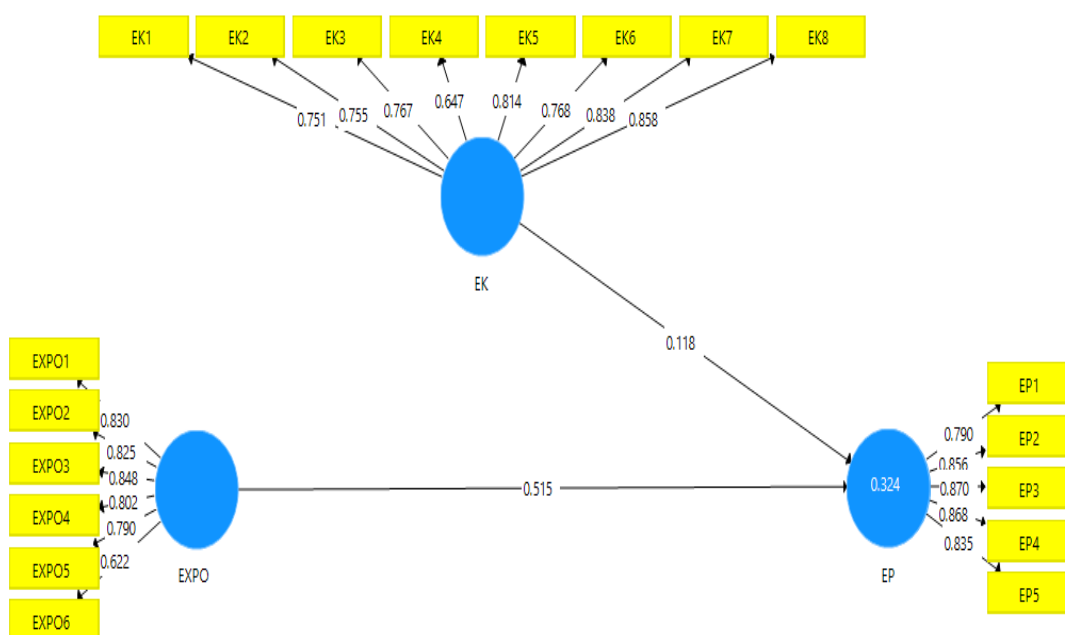


Fig. 2 Model Validation

3.2 Discriminant Validity

This study employed the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) technique to assess discriminant validity. Table II shows that the entire scores were less than the cut-off value of 0.85, demonstrating sufficient discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table II Discriminant validity and VIF

Variables	EK	EP	EXPO	VIF
EK				1.173
EP	0.324			1.479
EXPO	0.405	0.626		1.545

3.3 Structural Model Evaluation

Ensuring that the research model is free from collinearity issues is indispensable. Consequently, examining full collinearity inflator factors (VIFs) is essential as it aids in ascertaining multicollinearity problems and common method bias (Kock & Lynn, 2012). Similarly, a measure was taken to mitigate common method bias issues. Therefore, Table II illustrates the results of the full collinearity assessment. As reported, the variables' VIF scores were lower than the acceptable value of 5, implying the absence of collinearity and common method variance in the editorial (Hair et al., 2011; Kock, 2015). The next stage is structural modeling testing. We first assess the predictive relevance of the model through the evaluation of R^2 , which explains the proportion of variance in the endogenous variable explained by the exogenous variable. According to Chin (1998), R^2 values of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19 are considered substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively. The findings of the PLS-SEM estimation indicate that R^2 is 0.324, revealing that export orientation accounted for 32% of the variation in the endogenous variable, which is between moderate and weak. Furthermore, another test of the structural model consists of the model's predictive capability (Hair et al., 2011); this was conducted through blindfolding (Q^2) to obtain cross-validated redundancy measures for the construct. Q^2 greater than zero for a particular endogenous variable illustrates that the path model has the predictive capability for the independent construct. Therefore, Q^2 in this study was 0.230, demonstrating substantial model predictive ability. Likewise, the effect size was tested following the criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2017). F^2 evaluates the predictive power of each exogenous construct in the model. It evaluates the effect of the predictor variable on the outcome variable and assesses the contribution of every exogenous variable in the model (Hair et al., 2017). The criteria for testing F^2 were 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, suggesting corresponding small, medium, and large effect sizes (Hair et al., 2017). Consequently, the effect size for export orientation is 0.34, which is statistically significant in impacting the dependent variable as the value stands between medium and large.

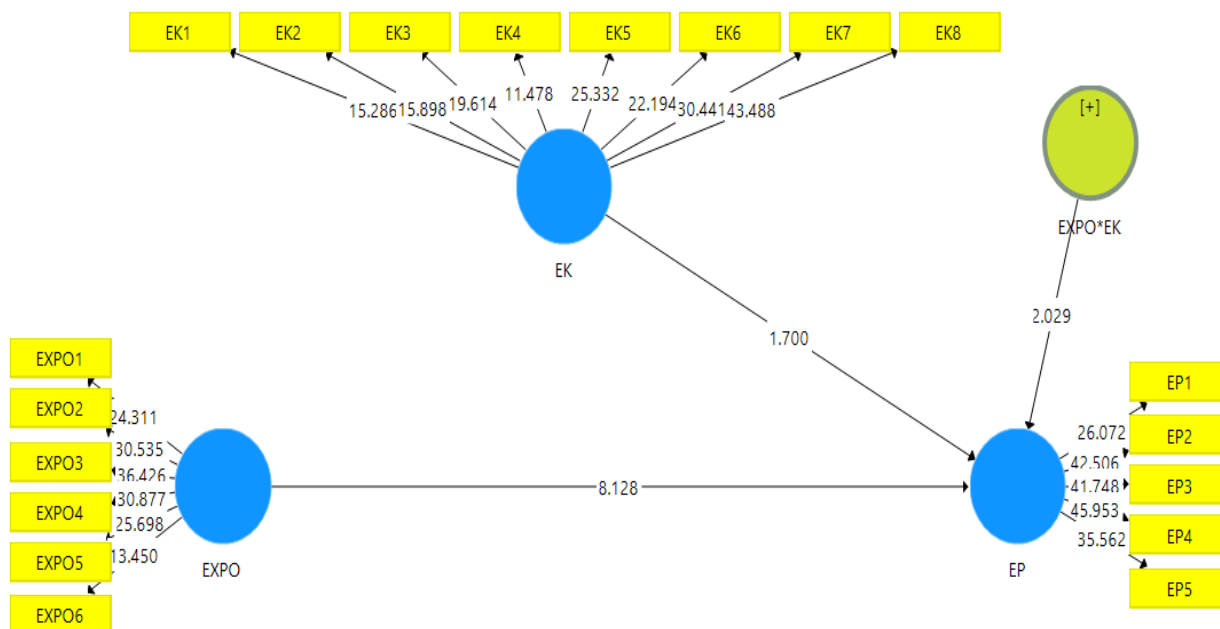


Fig. 3 Structural model path

This study adopted 5000 resampling procedures to obtain a standard error for hypothesis evaluation (Hair et al., 2011). Table III shows the structural path coefficients and bootstrapping results, indicating that export orientation significantly influences SMEs' export performance (β 0.476, t 8.124, p 0.000), lending support for H1. Furthermore, export knowledge substantially moderates the association between export orientation and SME export performance (β 0.106, t 2.029, p 0.021), as shown in Table III and Figure 3, supporting the second hypothesis, illustrating that the export knowledge interaction was significant, i.e., higher export knowledge strengthened the link between EXPO and EP. Therefore, the two hypotheses formulated earlier were supported.

Table III Hypotheses results

Hypothesized paths	Path coefficient	Standard error	t-value	p-value	Decision
EXPO > EP	0.476	0.059	8.124	0.000	Supported
EXPO > EK < EP	0.106	0.052	2.029	0.021	Supported

Note: ** $p < 0.05$, ***: $p < 0.01$

4. Discussion

This study develops a model that explains how export orientation affects the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria through the moderating role of export knowledge. The analysis demonstrates that export orientation has significantly improved the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria, supporting H1. This result aligns with the prior literature that export orientation enhances the competitiveness of exporting firms (Harrison & Poe, 2022; Shafiee et al., 2022). Hence, firms with intangible resources such as export orientation are apt strategic resources for SMEs to internationalize (Winckler et al., 2022).

The results entail that Nigerian SME owners with export orientation will likely achieve superior performance in the export market. Thus, they should be more focused, acclimatize to foreign market information, engage in trade fairs and exhibitions, and develop connections with partners abroad to achieve their firm's goals overseas. Additionally, this article broadens the recent streams of literature that recommend the need for further comprehension of the influencers of SME export performance from developing contexts (Haddoud et al., 2021).

Moreover, this study provides new insight into the interacting role of export knowledge. The findings point to a significant moderating effect of export knowledge on the relationship between export orientation and export performance, supporting H2. That is, export knowledge strengthens the association in the research model, and as export knowledge increases, the link between the constructs is enhanced. Consistent with this, the acquisition and dissemination of export information were associated with increased response to export knowledge, which boosts performance (Abubakari et al., 2021; Souchon et al., 2012). Furthermore, the results infer that the more export knowledge developed, the more information distributed to the various divisions within the firm, the better the reaction to this information, and indirectly, the bigger the growth of the export operation. Thus, it is paramount for SME owners to realize that despite the positive effect of export orientation on export performance, export knowledge is essential to strengthen the relationship further. Consequently, export knowledge indirectly reveals the magnitude of the association between the variables. Abubakari et al. (2021) and Akerman (2014) found that the more firms acquire export market knowledge, the greater the growth in their export market.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the study offers additional empirical literature on the factors that affect small firms' export performance from developing countries in general and Nigeria in particular, hitherto not investigated, hence adding to the SME export literature. Specifically, this editorial established a research model that explains the relationship between export orientation and export performance with export knowledge as a moderator. Considering the scarcity of empirical evidence on the export orientation-export performance relationship through export knowledge in developing nations, the study expands the internationalization literature by responding to the calls for further research on SME export performance antecedents, particularly in the developing countries such as Nigeria (Haddoud et al., 2021; Paul, 2020; Zahoor et al., 2020), as a result, the article adds new theoretical insights to the existing export literature.

4.2 Managerial Relevance

The findings of this study have important implications for practice. SME owners/managers in Nigeria should pay attention to export orientation and export knowledge since both can increase performance. It denotes that appropriate orchestration of an organization's capabilities, like export orientation and export knowledge, helps SMEs in Nigeria enhance their performance. The result also serves as a guide that may assist SME owners/managers who aim to engage in diversification strategies through exporting and allocating resources to succeed overseas. Since these SME owners superintend their firms' affairs with limited resources, it is prudent to cultivate a culture that promotes persistent and efficient export knowledge with relevant network players in their sector. Similarly, SME owner-managers may find the outcome helpful in developing knowledge to manufacture unique products and ensure expansion through exporting. Since export knowledge moderates the association between the abovementioned constructs, SMEs should invest more in acquiring export orientation and knowledge to enhance their foreign market activities significantly. Furthermore, the outcome may serve as a yardstick that will help the government saddled with the responsibilities of promoting SME diversification, developing a policy framework to generate foreign revenue for the government and the owners, and training potential exporters among the existing SMEs.

5. Conclusion, Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

5.1 Conclusion

The prime objective of this study is to investigate the effect of export orientation on SMEs' export performance through the moderating role of export knowledge in Nigeria. This editorial developed and empirically evaluated a conceptual model for Nigerian exporting SMEs and found that export orientation positively predicts the export performance of

Nigerian SMEs. Since export orientation favors export performance, it is a considerable capability that should be integrated into the firm's operations. The results validate that export knowledge significantly moderates the nexus. Therefore, the present study contributes by broadening the established export literature. Similarly, it responds to the calls for further research on factors influencing SME export performance, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria (Haddoud et al., 2021; Paul, 2020; Zahoor et al., 2020; 2023).

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

Although the present work contributes significantly to the theory, practices, and processes, the paper has limitations that may guide subsequent studies. The present study focused on exporting SMEs from different sectors; nevertheless, working on a single industry will offer new insight into sectoral performance. Future research should be conducted in a single industry, such as manufacturing or agriculture. Additionally, since many factors influence the export performance of SMEs apart from export orientation, though not adopted in developing contexts like Nigeria, further research should consider examining the effects of variables such as entrepreneurial orientation, brand orientation, and learning orientation as they were confirmed to have influenced firm performance positively. Consequently, employing the proposed constructs should enrich the existing research model. Another line of inquiry is the fact that this study only considered SMEs, which constitute only 3.1 percent of the small firms in Nigeria (SMEDAN & NBS, 2021); specifically, we recommended that future research focus on micro-enterprises comprising over 90% of firms in the country.

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