Gadjah Mada International Journal of Business
Vol. 27, No. 1 (January-April 2025): 61-92

Learning Orientation and Export Performance in Nigeria: The Moderating Effect of Export Knowledge

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Abstract: This study explores the influence of learning orientation as an antecedent of SME export performance among Nigerian SMEs through the moderating role of export knowledge. This article opted for descriptive research using a survey design to collect data from owners or managers of exporting SMEs in Nigeria. Two hundred seventy-eight (278) respondents participated in this study using a convenient sampling technique; partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was utilized for data estimation. The results established that learning orientation positively affects SMEs' export performance. In addition, export knowledge significantly moderates the relationship between learning orientation and export performance. The article contributes by broadening the body of knowledge and providing invaluable information for understanding SMEs' export performance determinants in developing economies like Nigeria, as recommended by scholars. It also contributes to the recent streams of empirical investigation that seek to enhance the comprehension of the resources needed for successful export operations.

Keywords: learning orientation, Export performance, Export knowledge, SMEs, Nigeria
JEL Classification: L26, F23, O33

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ISSN: PRINT 1411-1128 | ONLINE 1411-1128
http://journal.ugm.ac.id/gamaijb

Introduction

The international market provides a myriad of opportunities because of the presence of a massive customer base and profits, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from developing and emerging markets like Nigeria. As a result, for SME owners or managers to substantially succeed in the export market, they must create competitive capability (Abdul-Talib et al., 2023; Ayob et al., 2022). However, SMEs are constrained by limited resources, which affect their growth and internationalization prospects (Ayob et al., 2022; Carneiro et al., 2022). Thus, exporting is the easiest and least risky means for SMEs to access the international market due to the lower commitment of financial resources (Chen et al., 2016; Temiz et al., 2015). Accordingly, global business operations are associated with intricacies; consequently, dynamic capabilities are a prerequisite for SMEs' achieving greater performance success in the export market (Falahat et al., 2020). Similarly, strategic orientation, such as learning, is a critical success factor for SMEs to go global (Abubakar et al., 2024; Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Tho, 2019). Therefore, adopting a strategic orientation such as a learning orientation is an invaluable strategy for effective export operations (Abubakar et al., 2024; Boso et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, the performance of exporting SMEs in Nigeria is far below expectations, as evidence has proven (NEPC, 2019; SMEDAN, 2021). However, despite several interventions by the government to enhance SME growth and expansion in Nigeria, challenges persist that inhibit the development of the sector. Even though SMEs are regarded as drivers of economic growth universally, available literature reveals that their export contribution to GDP in Nigeria is quite small, i.e., 7.27 percent (SMEDAN & NBS, 2013), 7.64 percent (SMEDAN, 2017), and 6.21 percent (SMEDAN & NBS, 2021). Meanwhile, for other developing economies such as Angola, Ghana, Swaziland, etc., the growth rate is up to 30 percent and beyond (Karedza & Govender, 2019). Also, export earnings from SMEs have declined hugely, from $22.847 billion in 2012 to 9.909 billion in 2014, $3.618 billion in 2015, and $1.871 billion in 2019 (NEPC, 2016, 2020). This is contrary to the government's effort to build a solid private sector through the SME to generate foreign earnings and cushion the effect of global oil price fluctuations, which affect the country's economy adversely (Chukwu et al., 2022). Therefore, the critical factors determining firms' export performance among SMEs in Africa are still unclear (Haddoud et al., 2021), perhaps one of the reasons for the poor performance among exporting SMEs in Nigeria.

Despite the extensive earlier research on company export success, there is a dearth of empirical scholarly work on the antecedents of their performance, especially in developing economies such as Asia and Africa (Haddoud et al., 2021; Zahoor et al., 2020, 2023), which stresses why studies that attempt to fill this vacuum are crucial and relevant, thus warranting the present study. Moreover, the present research fulfills an appeal and responds to the call for more studies on the determinants of export performance of SMEs in Africa by Haddoud et al. (2021) and Chandra et al. (2020). The underwhelming performance of Nigerian exporting SMEs is an issue of great concern for the owners and the government. This emphasizes the importance of identifying and investigating factors

impacting firm success in order for SMEs to profit and diversify the nation's economy.

On the other hand, investigations reveal that studies on the antecedents of export performance, such as learning orientation (LO), have focused significantly on Western industrialized contexts (Haddoud et al., 2021; Kahiya, 2018). Consequently, knowledge of the internationalization of small firms from developing and emerging economies such as Nigeria is still exceedingly limited (Haddoud et al., 2021). Because of the distinction between these two economies, the outcome of studies from the firms in developed nations may have restricted implications for firms from developing nations, hence impeding generalization (Haddoud, et al., 2021). Specifically, the learning orientation-export performance link in the Sub-Saharan African Nigerian context remains underdeveloped. Accordingly, Kim-soon et al. (2018) recommended testing a direct link between learning orientation and export performance. These empirical weaknesses reinforce the need for additional research on the determinants of export performance in the developing market. In so doing, the current study contributes to the extant literature on organizational learning and export theory. In so doing, the current study contributes to the extant literature on organizational learning and export theory.

Additionally, due to the significance of SME internationalization, the study explores the possible moderating effect of export knowledge on the relationship between learning orientation and export performance. Theoretically, research has demonstrated that knowledge that results from the relationship between buyers and exporters may improve learning in an organization (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Moreover, export knowledge is believed to influence decisions about allocating resources to overseas markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 1990a). Also, firms prioritizing generating and exploiting knowledge about foreign markets more than material resources are more likely to adopt the learning orientation required for successful export market adaptation and expansion (Autio et al., 2000). Furthermore, export knowledge was used as a moderator in this study due to the empirically inconsistent results on the relationship between export knowledge and performance found by Wach et al. (2018) and Zapletalová & Bencsik (2015). Likewise, Ismail et al. (2018) and Ringo et al. (2023) encouraged using a moderating variable to examine the SME export performance association. Similarly, certain factors might act as a moderator between resources and export performance (Chen et al., 2016), leading to the use of export knowledge as a moderator in this study. In line with this, export knowledge is presumed to alter the direction of the link between the independent and dependent variables. Consequently, this study considers export knowledge a moderator in the nexus between learning orientation and SMEs' export performance in Nigeria.

Nevertheless, in this study, dynamic capability view (DCV) assists in explaining the extent to which a firm accomplishes a superior performance by capitalizing on its competencies and capabilities created, nurtured, modified, and reconfigured for unique positioning in the highly competitive market environment (Kabongo & Boiral, 2017; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2010; Teece, 2014). Accordingly, past internationalization literature established that learning concepts within the domain of knowledge development helps

enterprises to reconfigure resources and capability to compete favorably in the overseas market (Vahlne & Johanson, 2017). Consequently, SMEs should create a strategic set of dynamic capabilities to accelerate their internationalization and maintain superior performance (Teece, 2014).

In addition, scholars view learning as a strategic orientation (Hakala, 2011; Park et al., 2017; Tho, 2019) and a collection of capabilities (Skarmeas et al., 2016). They believe learning is crucial for SMEs, particularly for long-term performance and competitive advantage (Wolff et al., 2015). Literature in the context of export markets emphasizes the crucial role of learning in the foreign market, which is distinct from knowledge in the local market and significant to export success (Abubakari et al., 2021; Casillas et al., 2009; Ismail et al., 2020). Also, the ability of SMEs to absorb and use new knowledge will boost sales in the foreign market (Abubakari et al., 2021). As a result, it is important to maintain the capacity to promote knowledge acquisition and diffusion, and the process requires a learning mindset. The literature then emphasizes how learning allows businesses to benefit from innovation and continuous improvement (Lages et al., 2009). Therefore, the current article contributes to the literature in different ways. Firstly, it fills in the gap by responding to the recent calls for further research on SME internationalization from developing countries (Haddoud et al., 2021) and the suggestion by Kim-Soon et al. (2018) for testing the direct link between the learning orientation-export performance. Hence, this research will bridge this contextual paucity. Secondly, it adds to the body of knowledge in the export domain, providing empirical evidence on the role of export knowledge as a moderator on the learning orientation-export performance nexus and increasing the generalization to SMEs from Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria, not examined previously. Lastly, the paper tests the application of DCV in developing economies. Consistent with the research gaps, this study investigates the association between learning orientation and SME export performance in Nigeria through the moderating effect of export knowledge.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

This research framework is grounded on the dynamic capability view (DCV), which postulates that capabilities and excellent strategy are essential for sustaining superior firm performance, particularly in the fast-moving international context (Teece, 2014). DCV helps develop a new resource alignment and clarifies competitive edge in high-velocity markets (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Consistent with this, Knight and Cavusgil (2004) stress that accessing overseas markets requires enterprises to develop processes of establishing a business operation in a new setting, especially when survival in the fast, dynamic global market is contingent on export (Chen et al., 2016). When the market is dynamic, the enterprise product may differ from the customer's desires because an organization's performance depends on its limited resources (Cadogan et al., 2009; Teece, 2007). These resources have to reinforce the acclimatization of the firm's internal routines and procedures to conform to the market requirements (Bortoluzzi et al., 2018; Cadogan et al.,

2012).

As a result, academics contend that SMEs' source of competitive advantage is connected to the organizational values that precisely define flexibility and adaptability (Sapienza et al., 2006). Additionally, Bortoluzzi et al. (2018) and Knight and Cavusgil (2004) illustrate that culture related to values like learning orientation supports SMEs' capabilities, which, in turn, leads to the development and exploitation of market knowledge. Since internationalization intensifies rivalry pressure among firms, learning orientation could ultimately assist in improving the level of international expansion. Hence, the dynamic capability perspective provides the foundation for developing the research model whereby learning orientation, export knowledge, and export performance are examined. Also, there is a need to develop a moderating hypothesis since external forces may serve as a moderator between resources and export performance (Chen et al., 2016). Therefore, Abubakari et al. (2021) assert that capabilities enable firms to obtain knowledge and diffuse it across various sections, which allows the venture to be familiar with the challenges and opportunities in the export setting.

An Overview of the SMEs Sector in Nigeria

Small and medium enterprises are pivotal to the growth and development of any nation universally (Abubakar, 2022). Their contribution to the Nigerian economy cannot be overemphasized, consequently, they are considered to be the foundation of the economy (SMEDAN & NBS, 2021). Nigeria's micro, small, and medium firms account for 90-96 percent of all businesses, more than 80 percent of employment, and up to 49.7 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (Kippa, 2022). According to the Nigerian definition of SMEs, small enterprises are those firms whose employment band ranges between 10 to 49 with a capital base of 25 to 100 million naira. Medium enterprises are firms with the capacity to employ between 50 and 199 staff and a capital base of 100 to 999 million naira. This reveals how significant these firms are and the contribution they will continue to make in terms of economic stability and development in Nigeria.

On the contrary, despite the tremendous benefits associated with SME operations in Nigeria, the sector faces many challenges. For instance, there are 39,654,385 small firms in Nigeria, albeit only 3.1 percent are SMEs; the rest are micro-enterprises. Their overwhelming underperformance has manifested in their 6.21 percent contribution to GDP, clearly showing their inability to operate beyond the domestic market. Other challenges these enterprises encounter include poor export knowledge and access to foreign markets (SMEDAN & NBS, 2021). Therefore, for this sector to continue to push the country's economy in the desired direction and to build a robust private sector, it must be encouraged and supported.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework serves as a guide to research and determines the constructs to be examined and the statistical relationship to use. Thus, it is a foundation for knowledge

and study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Based on the framework in Figure 1, three constructs represent the firm's valuable internal resources and capabilities, i.e., learning orientation, export knowledge, and export performance. Learning orientation was hypothesized to be related to SMEs' export performance, while export knowledge was assumed to moderate the association. Also, export performance was the dependent variable. These suggested relationships were based on a dynamic capability view, which guides the analysis of learning orientation and export knowledge and configures firm resources in a single framework to evaluate SMEs' export performance in Nigeria. From this, it can be concluded that dynamic capability, mainly when exporting, can assist a firm in reallocating its resources and strategy to achieve superior output performance and sustainable competitive advantage in a dynamic competitive environment (Bleady et al., 2018). Companies with higher dynamic capabilities, such as learning or knowledge, outperform those with lower ones (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Teece, 2016). Consequently, the theory was suitable for examining how learning orientation affects the export performance of SMEs using export knowledge as a moderator.

Learning Orientation and Performance

Hakala (2011) accentuates the importance of strategic orientations as fundamental factors in an organization's managerial decision-making process and action. These orientations imply a persistent course of action and disposition that influences the management's thoughts and knowledge-seeking (Hakala, 2011; Rauch et al., 2009). Also, knowledge significantly influences firm performance and innovation (Al Amiri et al., 2020; Temiz et al., 2015; Wuryaningrat et al., 2024). The literature on organizational learning and the dynamic capability view emphasizes that by committing to learning, businesses can expand their knowledge and capability bases and improve their capacity to incorporate and utilize information in domestic and international markets (Akerman, 2014). As Akerman (2014) found, an association exists between a firm learning strategy and results in terms of growth and foreign market sales. Therefore, learning orientation can serve as an essential resource for the strategy development of SMEs (Abubakar et al., 2024; Falahat et al., 2021; Souchon et al., 2012).

Learning orientation refers to the belief and inclination of a firm to create and apply knowledge solely for strategy development (Sinkula et al., 1997). It can also be described as the degree to which firms obtain, share, and apply information and the level of emphasis on knowledge procurement for long-term advantages (Keskin, 2006; Ratten, 2008). Similarly, continuous learning enables employees to learn from the past, thus a crucial success factor of a firm since it allows for continuous improvement and modernization (Lages et al., 2009; Souchon et al., 2012; Tajeddini et al., 2017). Accordingly, learning organizations are guided by the shared vision that emphasizes the vitalities of the firm personnel in creating greater customer value (Slater & Nerver, 1995). These firms persistently procure, process, and spread knowledge of technologies, markets, products, and business processes throughout the enterprise (Slater & Nerver, 1995). Consequently, an

organization with a learning orientation culture continues to challenge long-held norms and principles concerning its venture (Slater & Narver, 1995).

Moreover, Slater and Narver (1995) emphasize that learning organizations excel in their capacity to anticipate and take advantage of chances in a disorganized and fragmented market. They further suggest that learning provides opportunities for the appropriate decision to be taken, which could result in the needed business performance. Ismail et al. (2018) conclude that the management's dedication to learning determines the innovative activities of SMEs on export. A company can improve its goods to meet the expectations of its target market by continuing to innovate (Rahman et al., 2022). This implies that information and knowledge can be regarded as the main resources for enhancing the export procedures of SMEs and minimizing the number of defective products provided to customers (Costa et al., 2016; Gebisa, 2023). In consequence, Souchon, et al. (2012) study demonstrates that the more information garnered from outside the firm, the more this information is dispersed to the appropriate persons within the firm, and the higher the responsiveness to this information, which in turn influences the growth of the export operations. Furthermore, Baker and Sinkula (1999) and Abubakar et al. (2024) assert that learning orientation is associated with product and export performance. Consequently, the following hypothesis was put forth:

H1: Learning orientation has a positive relationship with SMEs' export performance

Moderating Effect of Export Knowledge

Export knowledge is defined as knowledge concerning the micro and macro environment, rule and regulation, foreign buyer attitude, and foreign business practices, as well as the knowledge of how to efficiently handle these market factors (Wang & Olsen, 2002). Literature converges on the essential function of export market knowledge (Casillas et al. 2009), which is more distinct than knowledge in the local market and imperative to export performance (Xie & Li, 2018). In a similar vein, export knowledge is a major force behind the internationalization of firms and opens up business opportunities. It is also believed that the main strategy for minimizing market uncertainty related to internationalization is through market knowledge (Johanson & Vahlne, 1990b). Additionally, knowledge enables businesses to respond effectively to the demands of the export industry, resulting in superior performance (Gebisa, 2023; Mejri et al., 2018; Villar et al., 2014). Thus, to improve market share and formulate strategies, exporters have to be adaptable in comprehending diverse markets, customs, laws, and trade insights (Di Fatta et al., 2019). This suggests that acquiring export knowledge can alter the relationship between learning orientation and SMEs' export performance.

Moreover, businesses prioritizing foreign market knowledge generation and exploitation over tangible resources are more likely to develop the learning orientation necessary for successful adaptation and expansion in the export market (Autio et al., 2000). Furthermore, an internationalizing firm that stresses obtaining export knowledge is more

likely to perceive opportunities for continued or accelerated global expansion and to develop the learning orientation required for rapid adaptation to a foreign environment (Autio et al., 2000). Therefore, this study posits the following assumption:

H2: Export knowledge positively moderates the relationship between learning orientation and export performance

Research Framework

A review of pertinent literature was conducted before the current study developed a framework to investigate the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria. The research framework was adapted, and including export knowledge in this study and conducting it in a different setting made it distinct from the prior studies. Learning orientation, export knowledge, and export performance are the three variables that make up the research framework. Also, the DCV theory guided the development of the framework to explain the independent and moderating variables. With export knowledge as a moderator, the proposed framework argues that the independent variable should predict the dependent variable. The framework shown in Figure 1 highlights the ability to update competencies to reach a consensus in a changing business environment. Thus, a capability such as LO can accomplish a needed outcome abroad (Teece, 2016). For instance, the framework establishes that strategic orientations such as LO should impact export performance. According to Autio et al. (2000), a company that prioritizes export knowledge acquisition is more likely to develop the learning orientation necessary for quick adaptation to a foreign environment and to view opportunities for continued foreign diversification. Therefore, export knowledge can moderate the relationship not investigated hitherto. Thus, these nexuses will be examined empirically.

Furthermore, obtaining export performance depends on managers' ability to comprehend the export market. This can be done by learning about the foreign market, which calls for applying the dynamic capability theory. Managers can then utilize this knowledge to make well-informed decisions in various settings. Consistent with the literature, the variables in the framework were chosen based on their capacity to predict export performance (Abubakar et al., 2024; Falaha et al., 2021; Harrison & Pooe, 2022). Also, strategic orientations such as learning orientation or export knowledge are related to innovative and unique competencies that positively influence enterprise success (Sarkar et al., 2016).

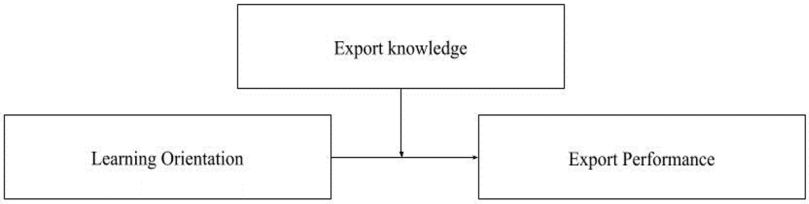

Figure 1. Research Framework

Methodology

Measurements Instrument

Straub et al. (2004) suggest that scholars adopt previously validated items to increase content validity. Consequently, the variables in this study and their measures were derived from past studies and possessed strong psychometric properties. For instance, the export knowledge measurements were derived from Wang and Olsen (2002) and Shamsuddoha and Yunus (2006). The measures have good construct validity of 0.87 and 0.91. Similarly, items measuring export performance were adopted from Wang and Olsen (2002), and their empirical study found the construct's Cronbach's alpha value to be 0.92. likewise, the items measuring learning orientation were adopted from Wolff et al. (2015) and Huang and Li (2017). All items were assessed using a 7 Likert scale anchored from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The constructs and the measuring instruments utilized in this study are in the appendix.

Study Population

A population is a collection of potential participants with particular characteristics from which a researcher can study and draw conclusions (Salkind, 2012). It also includes a framework consisting of a list of all population attributes while selecting the sample. The Nigerian exporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) registered with the Nigeria Export Promotion Council (NEPC) are the subjects of this study. SMEs in Nigeria must register with the NEPC to export their goods. Using the NEPC database, a total of 1,966 SMEs were identified as the research population. However, to obtain valid and reliable data, the SMEs (units of analysis) were selected based on the fulfillment of specific criteria. The inclusive yardstick for the population is that firms must be SMEs and actively participate in export operations. Other firms, such as nano- or micro-enterprises, were excluded from the study because they only served the local market. The respondents in this study are the owners and managers of exporting SMEs because they are more conversant with export procedures and possess sufficient knowledge of export activities.

Sample and Data Collection Procedure

The sample in this research consists of SMEs selected from the compendium of SMEs registered with NEPC. The sampling frame in this study is the SMEs registered with NEPC. Furthermore, a quantitative survey method was employed. A survey was developed in the form of a questionnaire as a means for gathering data. Thus, the sample size for this study is 300, according to Yamane's (1967) formula. To lower non-response issues, outliers, missing values, incomplete questionnaires, and measurement errors, Salkind (2012) also recommends increasing the sample size by 40–50%. A higher sample size results in more precise mean values, boosting analysis confidence, lowering the uncertainty rate, and raising mean precision (Salkind, 2012). Therefore, 450 paper-based questionnaires were administered face-to-face to the owners/managers of exporting SMEs in Nigeria using convenient sampling techniques. Face-to-face distribution of questionnaires increases

the researcher's ability to elicit responses and collect more accurate data from many participants. Additionally, the face-to-face interaction will allow for skewed clarification and prompt answers (Rowley, 2014). Moreover, hand delivery—also known as the drop-and-pick method—was chosen for data collection since it works best for managers and owners of SMEs in Nigeria. Managers and owners of SMEs familiar with exporting operations answered the questionnaire. All the items in the questionnaire were positively worded; no question was in negative form. After several follow-ups, 322 questionnaires were successfully retrieved, representing 72 percent.

Sampling Technique

In this study, a convenient sampling technique—that is, non-probability sampling—was used. The procedure is that the chance of being selected to form the study's sample is unknown. Therefore, accessibility and availability are considered when determining inclusion (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Non-probability samples have been used in social science studies, especially fieldwork research (Memon et al., 2017; Rowley, 2014). Similarly, Polit and Beck (2010) point out that substantial research involving human subjects does not use random samples. Even with a reasonable sampling frame available for random samples, achieving a 100% response rate is still challenging (Rowley, 2014). Consequently, this study employed a convenience sampling method due to its flexibility and benefits among the exporting SMEs within the study population based on accessibility and prospective respondents' willingness to answer the questionnaire. This technique increases the number of returning questionnaires during data collection.

Table 1. Descriptive Assessment of the Constructs

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learning orientation	278	5.7640	.75002
Export knowledge	278	6.3040	.49411
Export performance	278	6.0151	.80085

Mean measures central tendency that implies the average value in a given data (Sekeran & Bougie, 2016). Standard deviation assesses the variability or spread in a set of observations (Sekeran & Bougie, 2016). The constructs under review were measured using seven (7) point scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The mean values of the variable under investigation in Table 1 exhibit an intriguing characteristic. For instance, learning orientation shows an overall mean score (M = 5.764, SD 0.75002). This suggests a positive perception of LO among the respondents because the overall mean value is close to 6, thus revealing that the enterprises demonstrate a strong commitment to learning. Similarly, export knowledge recorded the highest overall mean score (M = 6.3040, SD =.49411), illustrating that respondents view export knowledge as high. Likewise, export performance demonstrates a high mean score (M = 6.0151, SD =.80085). Consequently, the whole construct mean scores were within the high-level range.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis represents the main entity that a researcher examines in his study (Dolma, 2010). Utilizing export businesses as analytical units could offer a deeper comprehension of critical, controllable success factors in the export endeavor (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994). SMEs are thus the study's units of analysis. The owners and managers of Nigerian exporting SMEs that operate are the respondents because they possess the most in-depth knowledge of the variables selected for this study (Ibeh, 2004).

Data Analysis Technique

Structural equation modeling partial least square (PLS-SEM) was applied to fulfill the condition for multivariate data analysis (Aliyu et al., 2018; Vem et al., 2024; Wuryaningrat et al., 2024). PLS-SEM is an essential path modeling statistical tool for assessing the cause-and-effect link between exogenous and endogenous latent constructs simultaneously and is, thus, widely employed in the social sciences field (Abdul-Talib et al., 2023; Hair et al., 2019; Halliru et al., 2018; Memon et al., 2017; Vem et al., 2024). PLS is desired when the study aims to predict some target variables or discover the main driver construct (Hair et al., 2011). Additionally, it provides reliable estimates of parameters, examines the model's goodness of fit, and better accomplishes valid and reliable confirmatory factor analysis (Hair et al., 2019). Moreover, PLS-SEM works well with both reflective and formative variables, small and large samples, and non-parametric data (Hair et al., 2019). PLS-SEM functions similarly to multiple regression analysis, with the advantage of concurrently estimating the structural and measurement models (Hwang et al., 2019). According to Ryan (2020), the technique's attractiveness can be explained by its explanatory power. PLS-SEM was selected for this investigation because of the study's predictive nature (Hair et al., 2019; Ryan, 2020). Therefore, SmartPLS 3.2.9 was employed in this study to measure the hypotheses developed earlier (Hair et al., 2019). Likewise, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 was utilized during the preliminary data investigation and demographic variables of the participants.

Results and Analysis

Descriptive Statistics of the Participants

Table 2. Demographic Attributes of the Participants

SN	Items	Frequency	Percentage
1	Years of establishment		
	5 years and less	60	21.6
	6 – 7 years	126	45.3
	8 – 9 years	39	14
	10 years and above	53	19

SN	Items	Frequency	Percentage
2	Industry		
	Food and drinks	14	5
	Rubber and gum	68	24.5
	Manufacturing	65	23.4
	Solid minerals	25	8.9
	Agriculture	106	38.1
3	Employees size		
	10 – 49	188	67.6
	50 – 199	90	32.4
4	Years of export involvement		
	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
5	Countries exported 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	Exporting regions		
	Africa	94	33.8
	America	46	16.5
	Asia Pacific	77	27.7
	Europe	61	21.9
7	Your role in the company		
	Owner	181	65.1
	Manager	97	34.9

The respondents in this study are SME owners/managers who export their products. The profile of the participants indicates that 21.6% of the SMEs were established between 1 and 5 years, 45.3% incorporated between 6 and 7 years, and 14% between 8 and 9 years, whereas those incorporated for more than 10 years constitute 19%. Meanwhile, respondents' industry was 5% food and drinks, 24.5% rubber and gum, 23.4% manufacturing, 9% solid mineral, and 38.1% were in agriculture. Accordingly, 67.6% of SMEs employed 49 staff or less, and 32.4% between 50 and 199. Regarding export experience, 0.4% have one-year experience, 10.1% 1 to 2 years, 43.2% 3 to 5 years, 38% 6 to 10 years,

while those above 10 years represent 8.3%. Concerning the number of nations exported to, 5.4% export to 1 nation; 55.8% 2 to 3 nations; 32.4% 4 to 6 nations; 6% 7 to 10 nations; more than 10 nations 0.4%. The respondents reported their export destination as Africa at 33.8%, Asia Pacific at 27.7%, Europe at 21.9%, and America at 16.5%. Finally, their profile is dominated by owners 65.1% and managers 34.9%.

Preliminary Analysis

Data screening and preliminary analysis were conducted to ensure that the data under investigation met the conditions for multivariate analysis, which resulted in the exclusion of 44 questionnaires due to outlying cases. The preliminary examination determines whether the data are ready for a meticulous analysis (Aliyu et al., 2016) and meets the conditions for multivariate analysis. Similarly, data cleaning allows an investigator to review the raw data to identify and address any possible inaccuracies or issues after gathering the data before conducting a thorough analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013; Tay et al., 2020). Data screening procedures involve ascertaining whether the data are normally distributed, looking for univariate and multivariate outliers, and checking for missing values and normality (Hair et al., 2014; Tay et al., 2020). Consequently, 278 responses were retained and utilized for the main analysis.

Common Method Bias

Common Method Bias (CMB) evaluates the erroneous correlation between the constructs that could arise from assessing each variable with the same method (Tehseen et al., 2017). It is paramount to look into CMB when gathering data using survey questionnaires (Podsakoff et al., 2003). CMB may have an impact on the results of the study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Thus, the data were examined for potential CMB, which, if found, would have exposed it to inflationary interactions (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Table 3 displays the findings of the full collinearity analysis and CMB. The VIF scores obtained for each construct were lower than the threshold value 5 (Hair et al. 2011), suggesting that CMB is not a concern in this study (Kock, 2015).

Furthermore, Herman's single-factor test was used to ensure that the research model is free from method bias (Podsakoff, 2003). Podsakoff and Organ (1986) suggested a threshold value of 50 percent, but the first factor only contributed 44.10 percent, as illustrated in Table 4. Consequently, CMB is not a problem for this study, and further analysis should be conducted.

Table 3. Full Collinearity Analysis

Variables	**Random Variables**
Export Knowledge	1.035
Export performance	1.444
Learning orientation	1.444

Table 4. Total Variance Explained (Herman's single-factor test)

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	7.938	44.100	44.100	7.938	44.100	44.100
2	2.164	12.021	56.121			
3	1.186	6.589	62.710			
4	1.027	5.703	68.413			
5	.807	4.482	72.895			
6	.627	3.485	76.380			
7	.551	3.063	79.443			
8	.508	2.825	82.267			
9	.475	2.638	84.906			
10	.399	2.217	87.122			
11	.355	1.971	89.093			
12	.353	1.962	91.055			
13	.328	1.821	92.876			
14	.314	1.745	94.621			
15	.299	1.661	96.282			
16	.252	1.399	97.682			
17	.223	1.239	98.921			
18	.194	1.079	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Collinearity Analysis

One of the major sources of measurement error is collinearity. This problem is a concern that has to be examined while using surveys (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, full collinearity variance inflator variance (VIFs) must be investigated to ascertain multicollinearity problems in line with the suggestion of Kock and Lynn (2012). Consequently, Table 3 displays the results of the full collinearity analysis as the VIFs scores obtained for each construct were lower than the threshold value 5 (Hair et al., 2011), implying the absence of collinearity in this study (Kock, 2015; Kock & Lynn, 2012).

Linearity Analysis

This study conducted a linearity examination to help assess the linear relationship between variables. According to the result reported in Table 5, significant linearity exists between learning orientation and export performance, with scores lower than 0.005, as Cronk (2018) recommended. Furthermore, the scatterplot in Figure 2 indicates a certain amount of linearity between the constructs under review because all the dots converge. Similarly, this study shows no significant deviation from linearity because the score is 0.260, as revealed in Table 5.

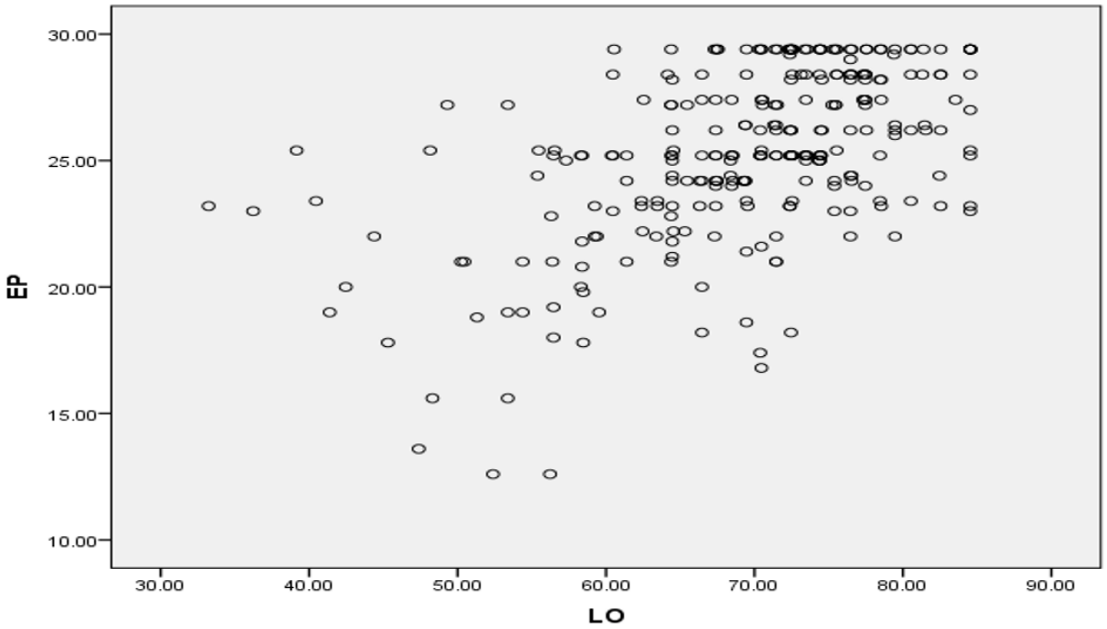

Figure 2. Scatterplot

Table 5. Anova

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
EP*LO	Between Groups (Continued)	1364.450	96	14.213	1.619	.003
	Linearity	432.053	1	432.053	49.214	.000
	Deviation from Linearity	932.396	95	9.815	1.118	.260
	Within Groups	1589.012	181	8.779		
	Total	2953.461	277			

Measurement Model

As Hair et al. (2014) established, a measurement model was used to estimate indicator reliability (factor loading), convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The measurement model results are presented in Table 6 for composite reliability and average variance extraction. A composite reliability larger than 0.7 has been recommended to provide empirical evidence for composite reliability (Hair et al., 2020). Similarly, rhoA is another reliability coefficient indicator that lies between the conservative Cronbach's alpha and the liberal composite reliability, thus, may perform as a good representation of a variable's inter-item reliability consistency (Hair et al., 2021) computed on unstandardized loadings. Consequently, the variables for this study have satisfied the cut-off values for composite reliability and rhoA of >0.70, as shown in Table 6. Also, for the convergent validity, the whole constructs were higher than the benchmark value of >0.50, implying adequate convergent validity in this study (Hair et al., 2019). However, LO13 was removed from the estimation owing to poor factor loading.

Table 6. Measurement Model Validation Summary

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	rho_A	AVE
Export Performance			0.897	0.924	0.900	0.709
	EP1	0.782				
	EP2	0.856				
	EP3	0.871				
	EP4	0.868				
	EP5	0.829				
Export Knowledge			0.907	0.918	0.996	0.585
	EK1	0.794				
	EK2	0.706				
	EK3	0.694				
	EK4	0.822				
	EK5	0.791				
	EK6	0.727				
	EK7	0.760				
	EK8	0.811				
Learning Orientation			0.913	0.927	0.915	0.514
	LO1	0.677				
	LO2	0.606				
	LO3	0.708				
	LO4	0.761				
	LO5	0.776				
	LO6	0.730				
	LO7	0.737				
	LO8	0.728				
	LO9	0.762				
	LO10	0.732				
	LO11	0.737				
	LO12	0.626				

Notes:
EP = export performance; EK = export knowledge; LO = learning orientation;
CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

According to recent literature concerning factor loading, scholars have devised a yardstick for the sample size needed to achieve a minimum acceptable level of practical and statistical significance (Hair et al., 2019). Hair et al. (2019) assert that, as sample size increases, the factor loading scores decrease and vice versa. Consequently, the sample size for this research is greater than 250; hence, a factor loading of 0.35 is considered sufficient, even though the minimum loading in this study is 0.606.

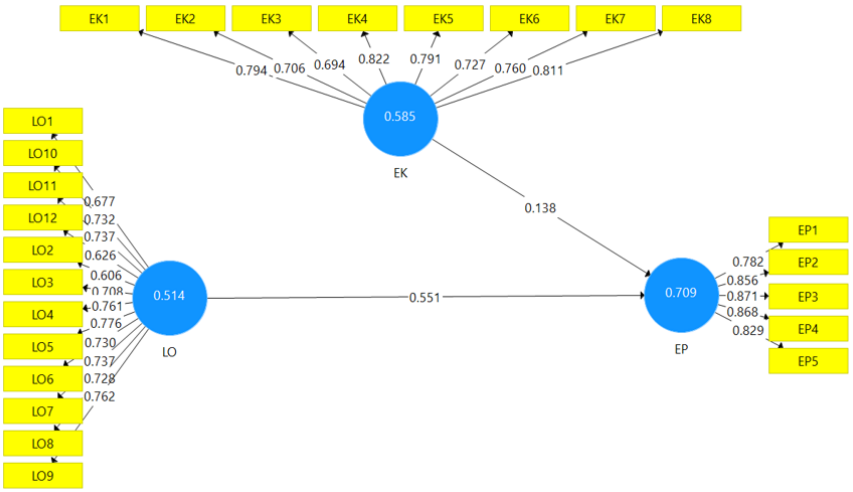

Figure 3. Measurement Model

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity is essential for any study with a latent construct to avoid multicollinearity problems. Discriminant validity suggests that two latent constructs representing two dissimilar theoretical concepts are statistically and adequately distinct (Henseler et al., 2015). Two evaluations were used to obtain empirical evidence for discriminant validity: the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratio. HTMT was established as a criterion for analyzing the relationship between the examined variables (Henseler et al., 2015). Consequently, the threshold values for assessing HTMT are 0.85 (conservative) and 0.90 for the most liberal (Henseler et al., 2015). Therefore, the HTMT scores obtained in this study, as reported in Table 7, were less than 0.85. Moreover, Fornell and Larcker's (1981) benchmark was used to compare the AVE's square root correlation of latent variable, which must exceed the scores in the columns and rows on that particular variable to establish that the measures are discriminatory. The results in Table 8 revealed that the values in the diagonals are greater than the scores in their respective rows and columns. Thus, the measurements employed in this study are distinct, demonstrating adequate discriminant validity.

Table 7. Discriminant Validity Assessment (HTMT)

Constructs	EK	EP	LO
EK			
EP	0.077		
LO	0.119	0.585	

Notes:
EP - Export performance; EK - Export Knowledge; LO - Learning orientation

Table 8. Fornell– Larcker Procedure

	EK	EP	LO
EK	**0.765**		
EP	0.087	**0.842**	
LO	0.092	0.538	**0.717**

Notes:
EP - Export performance; EK - Export Knowledge; LO - Learning orientation

Assessment of Structural Model

Having demonstrated the model validation and ascertained that the model has no collinearity and common method variance issues, the next step is structural model assessment. According to Hair et al. (2011), analyzing the predictive relevance of the model, which is one of the objectives of PLS-SEM, is the evaluation of R2, i.e., the sum of variation explained by latent construct. Chin (1998) proposed R2 values of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19 as significant, moderate, and weak, respectively. According to the findings of this paper, after the PLS algorithms assessment, R2 was found to be 0.309, revealing that learning orientation accounted for 31% of the variance in EP, which stands between weak and moderate. A benchmark proposed by Shmueli et al. (2019) was employed to test the predictive relevance of the model. The result reported in Table 9 shows that the model has higher predictive power as the entire indicators in the PLS model values were lower than that of the naïve linear model yardstick. Root mean square error (RMSE) was used because the prediction errors are symmetrically distributed, i.e., the errors have no longer left or right tails (Danks & Ray, 2018).

Table 9. PLS-Predict Result

	PLS_RMSE	LM_RMSE	
EP4	0.871	0.899	-0.028
EP5	0.923	0.958	-0.035
EP2	0.758	0.776	-0.018
EP3	0.882	0.91	-0.028
EP1	0.836	0.866	-0.003

The last phase of the structural model is hypotheses testing, that is, to evaluate the path coefficient that explains the powers of the association between exogenous and endogenous variables. As recommended by Hair et al. (2011), this study applied 5,000 resampling procedures. Table 10 reveals the model's structural path coefficients and bootstrapping result. The statistical values indicate that H1 is supported (β 0.550, t 12.730, p 0.000). This outcome suggests the influence of learning orientation on SMEs' export performance. Similarly, the result in Table 10 indicates that the interaction is significant, implying that export knowledge moderates the relationship between LO and EP (β 0.221, t 2.578, p 0.005), supporting H2. In other words, the higher the EK, the bigger the associa

tion between LO and EP. Additionally, this study's bootstrapping of 5000 resamples yields a 95% confidence interval, as shown in Table 10. As a result, a confidence interval different from zero indicates a substantial relationship (Latif et al., 2020).

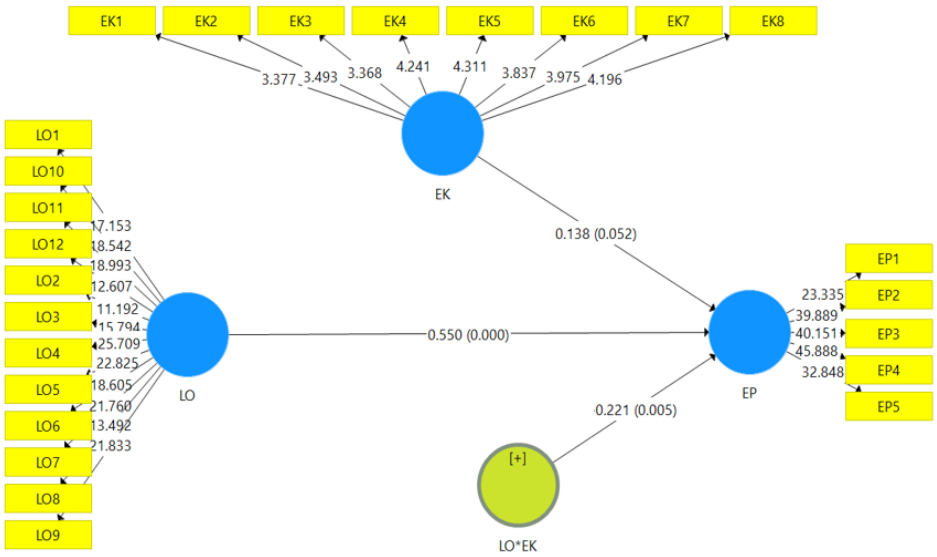

Figure 4. Measurement Model

Table 10. Structural Model; Hypotheses Estimation

Hypothesized paths	**βeta**	**Std. error**	***t* value**	***p* values**	**Decision**	**BCI LL**	**BCI UL**
LO -> EP	0.550	0.044	12.620	0.000	Supported	0.472	0.616
LO*EK -> EP	0.221	0.086	2.578	0.005	Supported	0.233	0.478
Notes: ***p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001**							

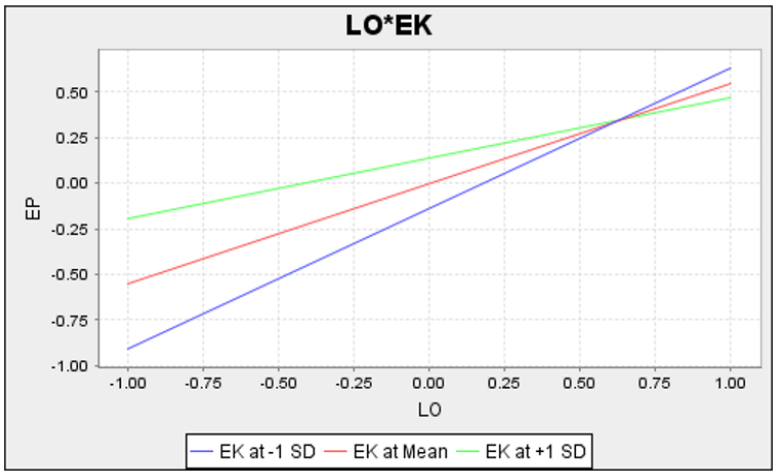

Figure 5. Measurement Model

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, a theoretical framework was developed to elaborate on the influence of learning orientation on the export performance of SMEs in the Nigerian context by considering export knowledge as a moderator. It was established that learning orientation positively affects SMEs' export performance, supporting H1. The result implies that SME managers must emphasize the culture of learning if they want to triumph in the dynamic export market. The result of this study is consistent with prior studies by Abubakar et al. (2024), Assadinia et al. (2019), Gnizy (2019), and Kim-Soon (2018), which found that increases in learning orientation enhance export performance. This stresses that to achieve greater output, a firm that aspires to survive and succeed must tactfully manage its internal resources (Saidi et al., 2021). The current research expands the recent streams of literature that suggested the need for a further understanding of the critical factors contributing to SME export performance in developing countries. Thus, we fulfilled the scholars' demand by conceptualizing and empirically assessing antecedents to performance, consistent with the established theoretical perspective of the firm's dynamic capability view.

Hypothesis 2 is related to the export knowledge moderating effect, and the findings reported in Table 10 and Figure 4 demonstrate that export knowledge significantly moderates the learning orientation-export performance nexus, supporting H2. This establishes that the higher the export knowledge, the stronger the relationship between LO and export performance. Consistent with this result, it is therefore pertinent for SME owners/managers to recognize learning orientation as a critical variable that promotes commitment to learning, shared vision, and open-mindedness among employees, as this will improve the firm level of performance in the export market, and export knowledge reveals the magnitude of the relationship indirectly. Furthermore, the study provides a unique contribution by testing the moderating role of export knowledge interactions on the association. Consequently, developing capabilities such as learning orientation and making it the norm for employees and export knowledge is fundamental to ensure successful export operations in the long run. It is also crucial for managers of SMEs to do their best to improve their export department staff's vigilance toward necessary information and knowledge of the export market. As illustrated by Abubakari et al. (2021), Abubakar et al. (2024), Akerman (2014), and Casillas et al. (2009), firms with the ability to acquire foreign market knowledge and deploy knowledge augment their export market growth.

Theoretical Implications

The current study's findings add to the body of knowledge on export in various ways. From the theoretical standpoint, the results broaden the application of the dynamic capability theory in the context of exporting, specifically for SMEs in developing nations. Also, the study is important in widening research and empirical knowledge on the factors that boost SMEs' export performance. The editorial illustrates how learning orientation affects SMEs' export performance. Overall, the outcome of the current study supports the DCV's theory of competitive edge, which results in thriving performance. Additionally, the study

adds to our understanding of how LO affects the export performance of small and medium-sized enterprises in Nigeria, a developing economy. This research contributes to the current literature by offering empirical insights into SMEs in the context of developing nations, which is essential given the dearth of empirical literature on the LO-EP nexus in these countries.

Furthermore, the study addressed calls from multiple authors to look into how strategic orientations like LO affect SMEs' export performance (Haddoud et al., 2021; Zahoor et al., 2023). Consequently, the study examined the association between learning orientation and SME export performance, with export knowledge as a moderator. Likewise, the research confirms the significant effect of LO on SMEs' export performance and a positive moderating effect of export knowledge on the relationship that has received scant attention in earlier scholarly research.

Managerial Implications

This editorial accentuates the relevance of learning and knowledge for SMEs; thus, it bridges a knowledge gap in the current internationalization of SMEs by integrating LO and export knowledge perspectives to develop a conceptual framework as a driver of SMEs' export performance. Similarly, export knowledge moderated this relationship significantly. Our findings imply that for Nigerian SMEs to increase sales and thrive, particularly in the fast-paced environment of export markets, they need to prioritize learning culture and the attitudes that stimulate it, encourage members to learn from one another, and challenge the status quo. Owners/managers of SMEs play a crucial role in this, as they must put more effort into learning and supporting initiatives that advance knowledge since doing so will give them a competitive advantage. Additionally, to ensure the success of their entry into foreign markets, Nigerian SME owners must also comprehend the laws, rules, and values of the foreign markets in which they operate. Our results also indicate that SMEs could benefit from understanding foreign markets when designing or modifying products to suit the tastes and preferences of consumers in those markets, hence enhancing learning capability. The findings further show that SMEs with knowledge of foreign markets are more likely to have an excellent understanding of distribution channels, competitors in foreign markets, and market risks. This will enable them to meet customer demands better and improve export performance. According to this study, learning orientation helps SMEs become more competitive and perform better in the export market. The study's findings emphasize even more how important it is for SMEs to impart knowledge to their staff members because they serve as a link between newly acquired knowledge and export performance.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer Nigerian policymakers and SME owners an intriguing practical contribution. This research is essential because SMEs help the nation by creating jobs and foreign exchange. The empirical evidence provided herein suggests that the com

plementarity of the dynamic capabilities of learning orientation and export knowledge positively influence and strengthen the export performance of SMEs in Nigeria. Therefore, the findings imply that SMEs in Nigeria must develop and nurture strategic factors such as learning orientation and export knowledge because integrating them results in greater performance overseas. Owners and managers should prioritize and make learning a routine organizational culture. For SMEs in Nigeria to succeed and remain relevant across the border, they must pursue the LO approach prudently, as the study proves that it drives performance. Thus, the paper serves as a reference guide for SMEs aspiring to export.

By improving the involvement of SMEs in exports, the government in Nigeria is expected to benefit from socio-economic development, which is essential to building a robust private sector. Therefore, the government must do everything possible to support SMEs to excel. The study has practical value for the Nigerian government. It may offer constructive insights concerning these firms' export development and policy-making to coincide with its strategy of diversifying the country's economic base. It will also assist government agencies saddled with the responsibility of monitoring the affairs of SMEs and comprehending the requirements these firms need to flourish overseas. The outcome will help policymakers recognize the mechanisms that can stabilize SMEs and generate foreign earnings, which are currently scarce. Therefore, the results suggest that the government should be extra committed to complementing SMEs to reach global markets, improve and streamline export processes, boost incentives, prepare programs geared toward educating owners with export knowledge, develop strategies to foster internationalization as well and put pragmatic solutions that will help them to overcome prevailing exports challenges.

Limitations and Future Study Directions

Although the objective of this study was achieved successfully, akin to past studies, it has some limitations that have to be considered before generalizing the findings. First, we investigated the effect of learning orientation on the SME's export performance; nevertheless, we did not consider other critical success determinants, such as export orientation and network capability. In the future, these antecedents should be taken into account. Secondly, comparing data among different countries would lead to obtaining interesting outcomes and make the theory more adaptive universally as the data for this research are limited to Nigeria, hence restricting generalization. Thirdly, this study collected data at one point in time. Consequently, a longitudinal study would be interesting in investigating the strategic activities of SMEs over time to uncover the dynamic changes in firms' internal resources and the extent to which the existing ties are sustained. Lastly, emphasizing a single industry would equally provide insight into how the utilization of these factors is related to performance enhancement.

Conclusion

The paper adds to the existing literature by including export knowledge to assess the relationship between learning orientation and SME export performance in Nigeria. Empirical evidence suggests that the learning orientation-export performance association is positive and significant, implying that learning orientation is fundamental for SMEs to boost their overseas market performance. Additionally, export knowledge has moderated this relationship significantly. The results of the current study provide an interesting theoretical and practical contribution for SME owners and policymakers in Nigeria. Theoretically, the paper extends the application of the dynamic capability theory in the context of developing countries. Based on the results of this study, prioritizing learning and integrating it into company culture should be top priorities for owners and managers of SMEs in Nigeria. For SMEs in Nigeria to succeed and remain relevant across the border, they must pursue the LO approach prudently, as the study proves that it boosts performance. The results hold practical significance for Nigerian authorities, as they could offer valuable insights into small and medium-sized enterprises' export development and policy formulation.

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Appendix

Table 11. Measurement Items

No.	Items	Source
Export Performance		Wang and Olsen (2002)
1.	Our enterprise is satisfied with the sales generat ed from our export market	
2.	Our enterprise is satisfied with overall performance in the export markets	
3.	Our enterprise has achieved expected sales over the last three years	
4.	Our enterprise has captured new market share in the last three years	
5.	Our enterprise generates a vital percentage of its profits from foreign market	
Learning Orientation		Wolff et al. (2015) and Huang and Li (2017)
1.	Our enterprise agrees that ability to learn is key to our competitive advantage	
2.	The basic values of our enterprise include learning as the key to improvement	
3.	Our enterprise view employee learning as an investment, not an expense	
4.	Our enterprise sees learning as a necessity to guarantee the firm's survival	
5.	There is a commonality of purpose in our enterprise	
6.	There is a total agreement of our enterprise vision across different levels, functions and divisions	
7.	All employees are committed to the goals of our enterprise	
8.	Employees view themselves as partners in charting the direction of the enterprise	
9.	Our enterprise highly values original ideas from our employees	
10.	Our enterprise culture encourages openness to innovation in procedures and ways of acting	

No.	Items	Source
	Our enterprise is not afraid to reflect critically on the shared assumptions they have made about customers	Wolff et al. (2015) and Huang and Li (2017)
	Our enterprise continually judges the quality of our decisions and activities taken over time	
	Our enterprise has specific mechanisms for which lessons learned are shared by members working in different units	
	Export Knowledge	Shamsuddoha and Yunus (2006) and Wang and Olsen (2002)
	Our enterprise has sufficient knowledge about the foreign markets we are serving	
	Our enterprise salespeople are knowledgeable about our existing foreign markets	
	Our enterprise has current information about foreign government regulations that affect our product markets	
	Our enterprise is aware of the economic situation in our export markets	
	Our enterprise can arrange shipping and forwarding without any difficulty.	
	Our enterprise can prepare and handle the necessary export documentation	
	Our enterprise has the skills and knowledge to cope with the challenge of globalization	
	Our enterprise has knowledge about business practices in our export markets	