

Internationalisation Practice and Reputation of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises in Edo State

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Abstract

This study investigates the internationalisation practices and reputation of SMEs in Edo State, Nigeria. Specific objectives include assessing the effects of export orientation, market entry strategy, and collaboration on the reputation of the SMEs. A correlational survey research design was employed, with a population comprising SME operators in Edo State, totaling 898,084 registered businesses. The sample size of 400 was determined using the Yamane formula, and data were collected via questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS. Results reveal that export orientation, market entry strategy, and collaboration significantly influenced the reputation of the SMEs. The findings indicate that prioritising collaboration can yield comprehensive benefits on the SMEs' reputation. The findings underscore the diverse nature of internationalisation and its varied impacts on business reputation. Recommendations include strengthening export orientation, developing strategic market entry plans, fostering international collaborations, among others, to enhance SME competitiveness in Edo State.

Keywords: Collaboration, Export orientation, Internationalisation practices, Market entry strategy, and Reputation

INTRODUCTION

The reputation of Small and Medium-scale Enterprises (SMEs) constitutes a critical facet of economic development, acting as a barometer for the vibrancy of business ecosystems (Darius, 2022; Nwogwugwu, 2018). Reputation represents the perceived image and standing of the SME in the eyes of its stakeholders, including customers, partners, and the broader industry (Nwogwugwu, 2018). A positive reputation is an invaluable intangible asset that contributes significantly to the SMEs' sustained success. To achieve reputation at the global level, SMEs particularly those in Edo State often pursue internationalisation strategies that enable them to compete and gain reputation effectively in the global marketplace. The success of these strategies largely hinges on their internationalisation practices, which encompass the collective

Ogu & Omoregbe. Internationalisation practice and reputation of SMEs

abilities of SMEs to engage and expand into international markets (Metsola, Leppäaho, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, & Plakoyiannaki, 2020; Oladele, 2022). In the context of Edo State, internationalisation practices are reflected in various dimensions, including export orientation, market entry strategies, organisational characteristics, collaboration, adaptation to international standards, and cultural interaction (Nwaokocha, 2017; Murithi & Waithaka, 2020; Cassia & Magno, 2022).

Internationalisation practice refers to the collective ability of the SMEs to successfully engage and expand in international markets (Metsola, et al., 2020; Oladele, 2022). This practice is reflected in the SME in Edo State's export orientation, market entry strategy, and collaboration (Nwaokocha, 2017; Daniel, Oru, & Mbonu, 2021).

Export orientation is the degree to which the SMEs focuses on and tailors its products or services for international markets, enabling it to tap into global opportunities (Daniel, et al., 2021). Market entry strategy encompasses the deliberate choices a business makes when venturing into new international markets, considering factors such as timing, mode of entry, and risk mitigation (Akande & Khadka, 2018). Collaboration involves strategic partnerships and alliances that SMEs form with local and international entities, facilitating market access and shared resources (Anoke, Osita, Okafor, & Nzewi, 2022). Together, these dimensions constitute the foundation of internationalisation practice that can shape the trajectory of the SMEs in Edo State.

While scholars acknowledge the immense potential of internationalisation in expanding market reach and enhancing reputation for SMEs, there is a notable paucity of Nigerian SMEs venturing into international markets (Shigang & Guozhi's, 2017; Salehi, 2018; Igbokwe & Elikwu, 2019; Wegwu, 2022). Remarkably, SMEs in Edo State, Nigeria often operate exclusively at the domestic level for extended periods, neglecting international avenues. This lack of internationalisation can be attributed to their limited awareness and understanding of critical issues that are essential for global business success, including export orientation, market strategy, organisational characteristics, collaboration, adaptation to international standards, and cultural interaction.

Notably, many SMEs in Edo State appear to lack the requisite information to navigate the complexities of exporting products, and their adherence to a single market strategy for prolonged periods reflects a potential unawareness of diversification opportunities. Researchers contend that these SMEs tend to operate independently, missing out on the advantages of collaboration with industry peers (Nwaokocha, 2017; Igbokwe & Elikwu, 2019).

A substantial challenge emerges from the dearth of studies examining the connection between the internationalisation practice and the reputation of SMEs in Nigeria, particularly in Edo State (Oyewobi, Windapo, Rotimi, & Jimoh, 2016; Oluwatoyin, Oluwole, Taiye, Joy, Maxwell, Ayodotun & Charles, 2018). There is need to find out why SMEs in Edo State, despite their integral role in the sector, have not fully embraced internationalisation and the consequential effects on their competitiveness. This study endeavours to unravel the barriers obstructing the internationalisation of SMEs in Edo State, examining the awareness and application of key internationalisation constructs. By addressing this gap, the research aims to

illuminate the potential impact of internationalisation on the reputation of SMEs in the manufacturing sector in Edo State.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to examine the internationalisation practice and reputation of SMEs in Edo State. The specific objectives are to:

1. determine the effect of export orientation on the competitiveness of SMEs in Edo State;
2. determine the effect of market entry strategy on the competitiveness of SMEs in Edo State; and
3. ascertain the extent to which collaboration influences the competitiveness of SMEs in Edo State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalisation and Reputation of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

The relationship between internationalisation practices and the reputation of the SMEs is a complex one, influenced by various factors. Studies focusing on export orientation, market entry strategy, and collaboration show that these practices can affect SMEs reputation.

Export orientation and reputation: Studies by Fetscherin, Alon, and Johnson (2010), Salehi (2018), Samson (2022), and Oluwatoyin et al. (2018) suggest that export orientation has a positive impact on the reputation of SMEs. These studies found that SMEs with a higher export orientation tend to have better marketing strategies, higher competitiveness, and improved entrepreneurial orientation. This, in turn, enhances their reputation in the global market.

It is therefore proposed that:

Ho₁: *There is no significant relationship between export orientation and the reputation of SMEs in Edo State.*

Market entry strategy and reputation

Research by Shigang and Guozhi (2017), Cui, Fan, Li, and Choi, (2020), and Kaunyangi, Deya, and Kariuki (2023) indicates that market entry strategy is crucial in shaping the reputation of SMEs. These studies showed that SMEs that adopt appropriate market entry strategies, such as cost leadership, differentiation, and diversification, tend to perform better internationally and have a more positive reputation.

It is therefore proposed that:

Ho₂: *There is no significant relationship between market entry strategy and the reputation, of SMEs in Edo State.*

Collaboration and reputation

Studies by Antonio et al. (2016), Nwaokocha (2017), Anoke et al. (2022), and Wegwu (2022) highlight the importance of collaboration in enhancing the reputation of SMEs. These studies

found that strategic partnerships, entrepreneurial alliances, and integrative tactics can help SMEs improve their competitiveness, sustainability, and reputation.

It is therefore proposed that:

Ho₃: There is no significant relationship between collaboration and the reputation of SMEs in Edo State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned on the Uppsala Model, formulated by Valne and Johanson (1977), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the internationalisation process of the SMEs. The central proposition of the model is rooted in the idea that SMEs typically undertake internationalisation gradually and incrementally. According to the model, firms initiate their internationalisation journey by entering markets that are geographically close and culturally similar before expanding into more distant and dissimilar markets. Valne and Johanson (2013) emphasise the significance of experiential knowledge accumulation and the learning process as integral components shaping the internationalisation trajectory of SMEs.

The model's key propositions revolve around the sequential and progressive nature of internationalisation (Valne & Johanson, 2013). It posits that firms first engage in sporadic export activities, gradually increasing commitment as they accumulate knowledge and experience in the target markets (Childs & Jin, 2014). This gradual expansion is driven by the need for firms to familiarize themselves with the complexities of international business, adapt to diverse cultural contexts, and mitigate risks associated with unfamiliar environments (Childs & Jin, 2014). The Uppsala Model suggests that commitment and involvement deepen over time as firms gain confidence and understanding of international markets.

Applying the Uppsala Model to the context of internationalisation practice and reputation of SMEs reveals its relevance. The emphasis on gradual expansion aligns with the notion that building internationalisation practice requires a step-by-step approach, encompassing aspects such as export orientation, market entry strategy, and collaboration. By focusing on experiential learning and incremental market entries, SMEs can enhance their reputation by adapting to international standards and cultivating a strategic approach to global markets.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a correlational survey research design was adopted. The population of this study was made up of SMEs' operators (that is owners or managers) in Edo State. Based on SMEDAN (2022) report, there are 898,084 registered SMEs in Edo State. The 898,084 SMEs constitute the population of the study. To determine an appropriate sample size for the study, the Taro Yamane (1964) formula was used to get a sample size of 400. The calculation was shown below.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where n = sample size; N = population size; e = level of significance desired; and Given that $N = 898,084$, $e = 0.05$; $n = \frac{898,084}{1+(898,084 \times 0.05 \times 0.05)}$

$n = \frac{898,084}{2246.21}$; $n = 400$ (approximate). From the above formula, the sample size for this study is 400.

Multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 400 SMEs across the LGAs in Edo State. To achieve this, quota and cluster sampling were used. The quota sampling was done by allocating a proportion of sample size to SMEs in each of the LGAs. Next, cluster sampling was used to locate the SMEs in each LGAs. In using the cluster sampling, first commercial centres with high level of economic and social activities was identified in each of the LGAs. Then SMEs that are concentrated in such commercial centres was selected purposively but based on the quota allocation for the particular LGA. The owners of the SMEs was studied, where the owners are not available, their managers was studied as a representative of the owners.

A multiple regression model was used to represent the constructs used in this study. They explain the changes that take place in the reputation of SMEs due to changes in internationalisation practice. The assumption is that there is a linear relationship between reputation of the SMEs and the internationalisation practice proxy by export orientation, market entry, and collaboration. The justification for this assumption is based on the behaviour of similar variables in earlier studies. Thus, the model specifications are:

$$REP = x_0 + x_1EXO + x_2MKE + x_3COL + u \dots \dots \dots \text{Equation 3.1}$$

Where: REP = Reputation; EXO = Export orientation; MKE =Market entry; COL= Collaboration; μ = error terms; x_0 = Constant. $x_1, x_2, x_3,$ = Coefficients of the various independent variables The *a priori* expectations were: $x_1, x_2,$ and $x_5 > 0$.

A 12-item, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to evaluate the independent variable, internationalisation practice, and a 4-item, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was for dependent variable, reputation The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale to score each item, with the options being strongly agree (5), agree (4), uncertain (3), disagree (2), and severely disagree (1)..

To ascertain the validity and reliability of the research instrument, a draft copy of the questionnaire was prepared and presented to the experts in the discipline for objective criticism and further modification, thereby ensuring face and content validity. A pilot survey was conducted by distributing 20 copies of the questionnaire to some SME operators in Benin City. The data were tested for reliability using the Cronbach alpha reliability test. The results are shown in Table 3.1

Table 1: Reliability of the Research Instrument

S/N	Questionnaire Items	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha Value
1	Export orientation	4	0.789
2	Market entry	4	0.777
3	Collaboration	4	0.792
4	Reputation	4	0.789

Source: SPSS output, 2025.

Each construct has a value higher than 70% indicating that the questionnaire is reliable for the study.

Before data analysis was carried out, the copies of the questionnaires was assessed. This involves separating the completely filled ones from the incompletely filled ones. Thereafter, the data was coded and typed in the excel sheet. Descriptive and inferential statistics through the Statistical package for Social Science Research (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Regression analysis was further used to ascertain the effect of internationalisation practice on the competitiveness of the SMEs. The independent variables were evaluated for statistical significance using t-test for regression coefficients at 5% significance level (95% confidence level). Furthermore, the regression analysis was used to deduce the nature of relationship (positive or negative) existing between internationalisation practice and competitiveness of the SMEs. In testing the hypotheses, if the p-value is less than the significance level (0.05), the null hypothesis was rejected, otherwise it was accepted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the 400 copies of questionnaire administered, 339 (84.8%) copies were retrieved. 61 (15.2%) copies were invalid because they were wrongly filled. As a result, 339 of the copies of questionnaire were found usable, hence valid for the study.

Description of Variables

In this section, the responses of the respondents are presented in terms of the impression management tactics and job performance. All responses are in the order of the Likert rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D) or Strongly Disagree (SD), with ratings such as 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. The means of each of the responses were calculated. The figures below the frequency were used to represent percentage responses. The decision rule was based on 3.0. Mean values lesser than 3.0 were considered as disagreement to the responses. The tables below showed a description of responses. This was followed by their interpretations.

Table 2: Description of Export Orientation

S/N	Statements	Mean \bar{X}	Std. Dev.
1	This organisation is committed to expanding beyond local boundaries.	2.8	1.2
2	We allocate resources to enhance our product export capabilities	2.7	1.2
3	We exhibit a keen interest in understanding and complying with global trade regulations to facilitate smooth cross-border product movements	2.5	1.1
4	We engage in continuous efforts to diversify our export destinations	2.9	1.2
Grand Mean		2.7	1.2

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 2 shows that the SMEs in Edo State show a low commitment to export activities, with mean scores below 3.0, indicating a primary focus on local markets and neglect of international expansion. This reluctance or inability to pursue export-oriented strategies may limit their market reach and competitiveness in the global economy. Key challenges include lack of resource allocation, limited understanding of global trade regulations, and minimal efforts to diversify export destinations.

Table 3: Description of Market Entry Strategy

S/N	Statements	Mean \bar{X}	Std. Dev.
10	We supply our products to another country because there is a new market for them there	2.4	1.1
11	We have diversified the products we sell in other countries	2.8	1.2
12	We operate under franchise arrangement in other countries	2.8	1.2
13	We wholly-own subsidiaries abroad	2.7	1.2
Grand Mean		2.7	1.2

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 3 shows that the SMEs in Edo State show a lack of engagement in international market entry strategies, with mean scores below 3.0, indicating they're not actively pursuing global markets. This inward focus limits their growth potential and competitiveness, highlighting the need for support and training to develop effective international market entry strategies.

Table 4: Description of Collaboration

S/N	Statements	Mean \bar{X}	Std. Dev.
14	We actively seek collaboration with international partners to foster knowledge exchange and technology transfer	2.7	1.1
15	We leverage collaborative networks to increase our global footprint	2.5	1.1
16	Cross-border partnership is regarded by this organisation as essential for sharing resources, and addressing challenges in the international arena.	3.0	1.0
17	We engage in collaborative research and development initiatives to stay abreast of global industry trends and innovations.	2.8	1.1
Grand Mean		2.8	1.1

Source: Fieldwork (2024)

Table 4 shows that SMEs in Edo State show a low level of engagement in collaborative efforts with international partners, with mean scores below 3.0 and a grand mean of 2.8. This indicates a reluctance to seek international collaborations for knowledge exchange, global expansion, and R&D initiatives. Although they recognize the potential value of cross-border partnerships, they're not actively pursuing them. This lack of collaboration may cause SMEs to miss out on opportunities for innovation, resource sharing, and competitive advantage. To address this, policies and support systems are needed to encourage and facilitate international collaboration, enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs in the global market.

Table 5: Description of Reputation

S/N	Statements	Mean \bar{X}	Std. Dev.
30	My company is rated high within and outside the country for quality service delivery.	2.6	1.0
31	Our company is perceived as a leader in innovation within the industry.	2.7	1.0
32	I am confident in our company's ability to deliver on its promises to customers.	3.2	1.1
33	Industry stakeholders are likely to recommend or partner with our company.	3.2	1.2
Grand Mean		2.9	1.1

Source: Fieldwork (2024)

Table 5 shows that SMEs in Edo State perceive their reputation as a weakness, particularly in establishing a strong brand identity and customer loyalty. While customers find it hard to purchase their products compared to competitors, there's a positive note - an increase in customer demand and competitive pricing in the global market. The grand mean value of 2.9

highlights areas for improvement in reputation building and brand recognition. To boost competitiveness, SMEs can focus on strategic marketing, product quality improvements, and customer relationship management

Hypotheses Testing

To test the formulated hypotheses, the multiple regression table was used as shown in Table 5

Table 6: Internationalisation Practice and Reputation

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.137	.440		4.853	.000
Export orientation	-.109	.042	-.144	-2.603	.010
Market entry strategy	-.137	.051	-.166	-2.682	.008
Collaboration	.282	.056	.305	5.027	.000

R = .797^a; R² = .635; Adjusted R² = .629; F-Statistic = 115.685; F-Statistic (Prob.) = .000^b; N = 338;

a. Dependent Variable: Reputation (REP)

Table 6 illustrates the significant relationship between internationalisation practice and the reputation of the SMEs: export orientation ($\beta = -0.109$, $p = 0.010 < 0.05$), market entry strategy ($\beta = -.137$, $p = 0.008 < 0.05$), collaboration ($\beta = 0.282$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Since export orientation, market entry, and collaboration each significantly influenced reputation, the null hypotheses for each of them were rejected.

The R value of 0.797 signifies a 79.7% relationship between internationalisation practice and reputation. Additionally, the R² value of 0.629 in the regression model indicates its strength, elucidating its ability to explain the determinants of reputation. Specifically, the model demonstrates that the combination of export orientation, market entry strategy, and collaboration accounts for 59.6% of the changes observed in market dominance. Furthermore, the F statistic ($F = 115.685$; $p = 0.000$) underscores the overall significance of the relationship between internationalisation practice and reputation.

Discussion of Findings

The results in Table 6 indicate a negative relationship between export orientation and reputation, which contradicts existing studies. The findings suggest that SMEs in Edo State may not be leveraging their export activities to enhance their reputation, possibly due to a lack of strategic focus on export market development. The results are in agreement with Salehi (2018) who found that the only condition that will promote a positive correlation between export orientation and reputation is that the SMEs should possess the readiness to export. Similarly, Samson (2022) discovered that poor export orientation can derail global reputation.

The negative relationship between market entry strategy and reputation found in this study is inconsistent with previous research. The results indicate that the SMEs in Edo State are not adopting effective market entry strategies to establish a strong reputation in international markets. Shigang and Guozhi (2017) explains that in appropriate market entry strategies can affect international performance and reputation. Kaunyangi et al. (2023) also found that market entry strategies significantly influence the competitiveness of SMEs.

The positive relationship between collaboration and reputation found in this study is consistent with existing literature. The study's findings suggest that SMEs in Edo State that engage in collaborative activities with international partners tend to have a more positive reputation. Antonio et al. (2016) showed that strategic partnerships and entrepreneurial orientation are complementary, leading to improved reputation. Anoke et al. (2022) also discovered that collaborative efforts positively impact the growth and competitiveness of SMEs. The overall model fit is strong, with an R-squared value of 0.635, indicating that approximately 63.5% of the variance in reputation is explained by the internationalisation practices. This suggests that the model is a good representation of the relationships between internationalisation practices and reputation among SMEs in Edo State.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined the relationship between internationalisation practices and reputation among SMEs in Edo State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that export orientation and market entry strategy have negative relationships with reputation, while collaboration has a positive relationship. These results have significant implications for SMEs in Edo State, highlighting the need to reassess their internationalisation strategies to improve their reputation.

The negative relationships between export orientation and market entry strategy and reputation contradict existing studies, which suggest that these practices should enhance reputation. This discrepancy may be due to the unique context of SMEs in Edo State, highlighting the need for tailored strategies that address their specific challenges. In contrast, the positive relationship between collaboration and reputation is consistent with existing literature, emphasizing the importance of strategic partnerships in enhancing reputation.

The study's findings suggest that SMEs in Edo State should focus on developing effective collaboration strategies to improve their reputation. This can involve partnering with international organisations, participating in global trade fairs, and engaging in collaborative research and development projects. Additionally, SMEs should reassess their export orientation and market entry strategies to ensure they are aligned with their reputation goals.

Overall, the study contributes to the existing literature on internationalisation practices and reputation among SMEs. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seeking to enhance the competitiveness and reputation of SMEs in Nigeria. By adopting effective collaboration strategies and reassessing their export orientation and market entry strategies, SMEs in Edo State can improve their reputation and compete more effectively in the global market.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Develop effective collaboration strategies: The SMEs in Edo State should focus on developing effective collaboration strategies to improve their reputation. This can involve partnering with international organisations, participating in global trade fairs, and engaging in collaborative research and development projects.
- ii. Reassess export orientation strategies: SMEs in Edo State should reassess their export orientation strategies to ensure they are aligned with their reputation goals. This may involve identifying new export markets, developing export-oriented products, and establishing strategic partnerships with international buyers.
- iii. Improve market entry strategies: SMEs in Edo State should improve their market entry strategies to enhance their reputation in international markets. This may involve conducting market research, identifying suitable market entry modes, and developing effective marketing and distribution strategies.
- iv. Provide training and support for SMEs: Policymakers and support organisations should provide training and support for SMEs in Edo State to enhance their internationalisation capabilities. This may involve providing training on export marketing, market research, and collaboration strategies.
- v. Encourage strategic partnerships: Policymakers and support organisations should encourage strategic partnerships between SMEs in Edo State and international organisations. This can involve providing incentives for partnerships, facilitating matchmaking events, and supporting collaborative research and development projects.

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Ogu & Omoregbe. Internationalisation practice and reputation of SMEs

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