ENTREPRENEURIAL ORIENTATION AND THE GROWTH OF SMEs IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By

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ABSTRACT

This research examined entrepreneurial orientation and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular focus on SMEs in Plateau State. COVID-19 pandemic has caused serious disruptions to business activities around the world and has impeded the commitment of resources to drive business growth. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there seems to be a reduction in entrepreneurial activities (made manifest by the low number of SMEs in the state): strongly suggesting a lack of growth in Small and Medium Enterprises SMEs. We believe that entrepreneurial orientation is crucial in explaining this phenomenon. To achieve our objectives, a questionnaire, designed by Lumpkin and Dess (2001) was adapted and administered to 319 owners/managers of SMEs in Plateau State. The questionnaires were coded in SPSS version 23.0 and multiple regression analyzes were used to test the hypotheses. The results show that the entrepreneurial orientation dimensions of Innovativeness, Proactiveness, Autonomy and Competitive Aggressiveness were positively related to SMEs' growth in the State. However, the relationship between Risk-taking and SMEs' growth was not significant. Therefore, it was recommended that for SMEs to grow in the COVID-19 pandemic, owners and managers should be innovative, proactive, autonomous, and competitively aggressive in the State.

Keywords: Autonomy, Competitive Advantage, Entrepreneurial Orientation, Innovativeness, Proactiveness, Risk-taking, and SMEs Growth.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are very important to economic growth and they play very important roles in the development of many economies around the world. The SME sector accounts for the majority of businesses globally, and it is the growth engine of the economy contributing to job creation and global economic development(PWC, 2020). Data from World Bank indicates that SMEs represent about 90% of businesses and more than 50% of employment globally. In emerging economies, formal SMEs contribute up to 40% of national income (GDP). In Nigeria, over 40 million SMEs dominate the enterprise landscape employing more than 80% of the country's total

workforce and contributing nearly 50% to GDP (SMEDAN/NBS, 2017; World Bank, 2020). Despite their enormous contribution to economic development around the world, the majority of SMEs, especially in Africa do not have growth prospects to become large firms (World Bank, 2020). According to World Bank (2017), SMEs in developing economies show lower growth rates compared to their counterparts in developed economies. According to Global

It is quite a concern that SMEs are vulnerable to a high rate of failure. According to the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) cited in Asikhia et al. (2020), 80% of SMEs in Nigeria die before their fifth anniversary. The situation is such that most new SMEs in Nigeria do not move beyond the first stage of existence to other stages such as survival success, take-off, and resource maturity (Asikhia et al., 2020; Dzomonda & Fatoki, 2019). It is evident that growing a firm to a particular level hasn't always been easy, especially in today's highly competitive and volatile business world (Garba et al., 2019). This situation may be worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic where movements and work disruptions have affected business activities, causing emotional and psychological strain to entrepreneurs and managers of SMEs. The unfortunate uncertainty occasioned by the pandemic may dampen positive business sentiments, including impeding the commitment of resources to drive growth (PWC, 2020). Recent studies by Ojong-Ejoh et al. (2021) revealed that 88.6 percent of the SMEs reported being negatively affected by the pandemic. This becomes especially challenging for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that are known to operate in an environment of scarce resources (Miocevic, 2021).

Firm growth in northern states is just one-third of that of southern states, indicating that there are significant intra-regional disparities (World Bank, 2020). Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, entrepreneurial activities in Plateau State, Northcentral Nigeria have taken the downward path. Available statistics show a decline in the number of SMEs in the state from 2180 in 2013 to 1574 in 2017(SMEDAN/NBS, 2017). This shows a 27.8% decline in SMEs in the state. This is worrisome, as it amplifies the perception of the state as a civil service state: Rather than take to entrepreneurial activities, most people in the state seem to prefer civil service work. Despite GEM reports that Nigeria is a world leader in entrepreneurial spirit (Abdul, 2018; Terjesen et al., 2012), SMEs in the state have not witnessed growth. These ostensibly poor levels of growth have contributed to global SMEs' inefficiencies, which may be traced back to the SMEs' lack of entrepreneurial focus. (Al-Mamary et al., 2020).

Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) which has to do with the tendency of businesses to act autonomously, innovatively, competitively aggressive, take risks and proactively take initiatives to exploit potential market conditions is crucial in explaining the growth of SMEs. For instance, Al-Mamary (2020) documented that EO is positively related to the growth, competitive advantage, and superior performance of SMEs. This is further reinforced by the findings of Khan et al. (2021) that entrepreneurs that engage in innovative activities, risky ventures, and substantial involvement in proactive innovations of the market, product, or process will successfully grow their businesses. With the COVID-19 pandemic still ravaging the world, to succeed in today's fierce

domestic and global competition, SMEs must examine and adjust their strategy to the changing and dynamic environment (Al-Mamary et al., 2020). Even though an individual's entrepreneurial orientation has a significant impact on whether or not a company grows (Garba et al., 2019), owners and managers of SMEs around the world do not all value innovation, proactiveness, risk-taking, autonomy, and competitive aggression in the same way (Ayeni, Agbaje & Osho, 2015). Furthermore, not all Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) dimensions may be present or useful, as this is dependent on the specific environment. (Hughes & Morgan, 2007). Hence, the need to examine the contribution of the various dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation to the increase/decrease in growth of SMEs in Plateau State.

A review of extant literature shows that several empirical studies found a positive and significant relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SMEs performance in Nigeria (Benneth et al., 2019; Adegbuyi et al., 2018; Duru et al., 2018), however, there is scanty literature on the effect of entrepreneurial orientation on the growth of SMEs in Nigeria. Indeed, the limited literature available shows that t EO and growth orientation are positively correlated. However, it remains unclear if the same result is obtainable amid a ravaging global COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this research, anchored on these empirical gaps examined the effect of entrepreneurial orientation on the growth of SMEs in Plateau State during a pandemic, using Dees and Lumpkin's five models of entrepreneurial orientation.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO)

The term EO comes from Miller's (1983) study, which defines entrepreneurial organizations as those that are orientated toward product-market innovation by taking risky ventures and being the first to develop ideas proactively to beat their competitors. (Al-Mamary et al., 2020; Casillas & Moreno, 2010; Moreno & Casillas, 2008). To put it another way, a company is only considered entrepreneurial if it excels in all three conventional dimensions of innovation, proactivity, and risk-taking. Dess and Lumpkin (2005) take a different approach to entrepreneurial orientation. They combine Miller's three dimensions with competitive aggressiveness and autonomy to create a total of five dimensions. These five qualities (innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy) are all present in a firm's decision-making methods and practices. EO, according to them, refers to the strategy-making procedures used by organizations to find and develop new operations. It denotes a mindset and viewpoint on entrepreneurship that is represented in a company's continuous procedures and culture. (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). EO can also be defined as the processes used by key decision-makers to carry out their organization's mission, maintain its vision, and gain a competitive edge (Al-Mamary et al., 2020). As a result, EO is critical for a company's survival in a competitive environment since it allows it to recognize business issues and devise methods to solve them and surpass competitors (Benneth et al., 2019).

In general, research on the relationship between EO and business growth suggests that the two variables are positively associated, supporting the widely held belief that EO has a favorable impact on the corporate success (Casillas et al., 2010; Casillas & Moreno, 2010; Garba et al., 2019; Moreno & Casillas, 2008). This study is unique in that it looks at the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SMEs growth on a multi-dimensional level during the COVID-19 pandemic, to determine which aspects of EO are most important for securing SMEs' growth in these difficult circumstances. All five dimensions may be advantageous, but it's also possible that only a subset of dimensions is beneficial (Hughes & Morgan, 2007). All five dimensions of the entrepreneurial orientation construct are described in detail below to help you better understand it:

2.1.1 Innovativeness and SMEs Growth

There are numerous ways to define business growth. Changes in sales, assets, employment, productivity, earnings, and profit margins are commonly used to describe business growth (Asikhia et al., 2020; Olawale & Garwe, 2010). Entrepreneurs who want to optimize their profits must be prepared to expand their company in several areas, including employment, assets, sales, and turnover. (Garba et al., 2019). While it is true that the primary goals of most entrepreneurs are to earn wealth and maximize personal benefits, all firms must remember the need to maintain a balance between profitability and growth (Asikhia et al., 2020). Any business must grow as well as be profitable to sustain and stay relevant in the marketplace. This is based on the understanding that growth is an antecedent to the attainment of sustainable competitive advantage .and the belief is that firms that are undergoing growth phases have higher rates of survival (Asikhia et al., 2020). The dynamic of SMEs growth requires the business to move through five stages of growth: existence, survival, success, take-off, and resource maturity to be able to meet the primary goal of the entrepreneur (Olawale & Garwe, 2010). Hence, growth opportunities should always be explored, since growth goes hand in hand with business success(Asikhia et al., 2020). Creating and maintaining a successful business necessitates specific entrepreneurial behaviors based on the entrepreneur's values and attitudes (Garba et al., 2019).

Innovativeness can be a source of great progress and strong corporate growth(Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Innovativeness refers to a firm's efforts to find new opportunities and novel solutions that could positively contribute to the growth of the business. It involves creativity and experimentation that results in new products, new services, or improved technological processes. Innovativeness is one of the major components of an entrepreneurial strategy (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Innovativeness captures a bias toward embracing and supporting creativity and experimentation, technological leadership, novelty, and R&D in the development of products, services, and processes (Hughes & Morgan, 2007). Innovations come in many different forms. Technological innovativeness consists primarily of research and engineering efforts aimed at developing new products and processes. Product-market innovativeness includes market research, product design, and innovations in advertising and promotion (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Administrative innovativeness refers to novelty in management systems, control techniques, and organizational structure (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Thus, Moreno and Casillas (2008) state that strategy of innovation in new products and new processes have a positive and

significant influence on the firm's growth rate. Based on the theory of entrepreneurial orientation, we argued that the innovativeness of an SME would bring forth the imagination of the firm and their ability to come up with innovative ideas and creative processes to stimulate growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, SMEs can weather the storm of the COVID-19 problem by embracing organizational-wide innovation. This is because scholars strongly believe that of the five dimensions that integrate the EO construct, innovativeness is the one that meets with the greatest degree of consensus regarding its positive relationship with company growth (Casillas & Moreno, 2010). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H_1: *There is a significant relationship between innovativeness and the growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic.*

2.1.2 Risk-Taking and SMEs Growth

Risk-taking refers to a company's desire to jump at a business opportunity even if it isn't sure if it will succeed and to act without thinking about the implications (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Risk-taking is characterized by resource commitment to uncertain outcomes and activities and reflects an acknowledgment of the inherent uncertainty and risk in the original action (Hughes & Morgan, 2007). Making decisions and taking action without knowing what the likely outcomes will be; such ventures may also require considerable resource commitments in the process of moving forward (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005).

Insights offered by recent research in this area indicate that the current COVID-19 pandemic brought economic insecurity for both firms and consumers, and the consequences will be felt long into the future (Miocevic, 2021). In the pandemic, SMEs faced market risk (loss of customers, strong competition, stagnation in the market, and unreliable suppliers), financial risk (shortage of long-term financing, insufficient profit, unpaid claims, and inability to pay obligation due to shortage of working capital), operational risk (incomplete use of production capacity, low level of innovation, growing number of complaints and obsolete production facilities) and economic risk, i.e., inflation, interest rates, exchange rate and increase in prices of all types of energy (Grondys et al., 2021). These factors culminated in the #EndSARS protest that led to massive looting and destruction of many businesses. All these added and worsen the general economic uncertainty and political situation in the country.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic poses a general risk to all SMEs, it would seem natural that those SMEs capable of taking on higher-risk initiatives will gain a greater benefit in the form of increased growth. Scholars (who and who) concur that, in addition to challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic will provide the opportunity for many SMEs to reorganize resources for future growth (Miocevic, 2021). To be successful in business, SMEs must often take on riskier ventures, even if this means abandoning tried-and-true processes or products (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Risk-taking behavior is common in SMEs with entrepreneurial orientation, such as taking on heavy debt, introducing new products into new markets, investing in untested technologies, or making large resource

commitments in the pursuit of high returns (Casillas & Moreno, 2010; Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H_1: *There is a significant relationship between risk-taking and the growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic.*

2.1.3 Proactiveness and SMEs Growth

Proactivity refers to a company's efforts to take advantage of fresh chances (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). It refers to a forward-thinking approach in which businesses actively seek out possibilities to develop and introduce new products to gain first-mover advantages and influence the environment's direction (Hughes & Morgan, 2007). Proactive organizations keep an eye on trends, identify future needs of existing consumers, and anticipate changes in demand or growing difficulties that could lead to new business ventures (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Proactivity is a way of reacting to opportunities (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001). It's a good mode for companies that operate in dynamic surroundings or in industries that are still in their early stages of development, where conditions are constantly changing and prospects for expansion are many (Al-Mamary et al., 2020). Proactivity entails not only detecting changes but also being willing to act on them before the competition. Proactive strategic managers keep their eyes on the horizon, looking for new opportunities for growth and development (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). By putting competitors in the position of having to respond to first-mover activities, proactiveness aids corporations in gaining a competitive edge. The more proactive businesses, have higher growth rates (Casillas et al., 2010). Scholars (your list of scholars should come here) have discovered a link between proactiveness and growth in second-generation businesses, family and non-family businesses, and microbusinesses (Casillas et al., 2010; Garba et al., 2019; Moreno & Casillas, 2008). Hence, it was hypothesized that:

$H0_3$: *There is a significant relationship between proactiveness and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic.*

2.1.4 Autonomy and SMEs Growth

Autonomy refers to an individual's or a group's ability to take independent action to develop and implement a business strategy or goal (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). It refers to whether an individual or group of individuals within a company has the flexibility to develop and implement an entrepreneurial idea. In general, it refers to a person's skill and will to pursue opportunities on their own. Autonomy is the list, activities conducted in the absence of suffocating organizational restraints in the workplace (Al-Mamary et al., 2020). Even though one of the main sources of growth for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is their ability to enter into collaboration agreements that allow them to use a larger number of resources and capacities without having to own them, autonomy is one of the most important foundations for innovative and entrepreneurial behavior (Moreno & Casillas, 2008). Autonomy-oriented businesses are free of the shackles of corporate bureaucracy, allowing their employees to develop and implement new business ideas, which may lead to the correction of some defects (Al-Mamary et al., 2020; Benneth et al., 2019). We argued that the social distancing measures put in place by governments to

curb the spread of the virus would enhance the ability of organizations to act independently in the implementation of their growth goals. Since the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on SMEs, we reasoned that the strategic dimensions of autonomy would allow a team (or individual) to not only solve problems but also to define the problem and the goals that will be met to solve that problem (Casillas & Moreno, 2010; Gupta, 2019). Many research demonstrates a favorable association between autonomy and growth (Casillas et al., 2010; Casillas & Moreno, 2010; Garba et al., 2019; Gupta, 2019; Moreno & Casillas, 2008). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

$H0_4$: *There is a significant relationship between autonomy and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic.*

2.1.5 Competitive Aggressiveness and SMEs Growth

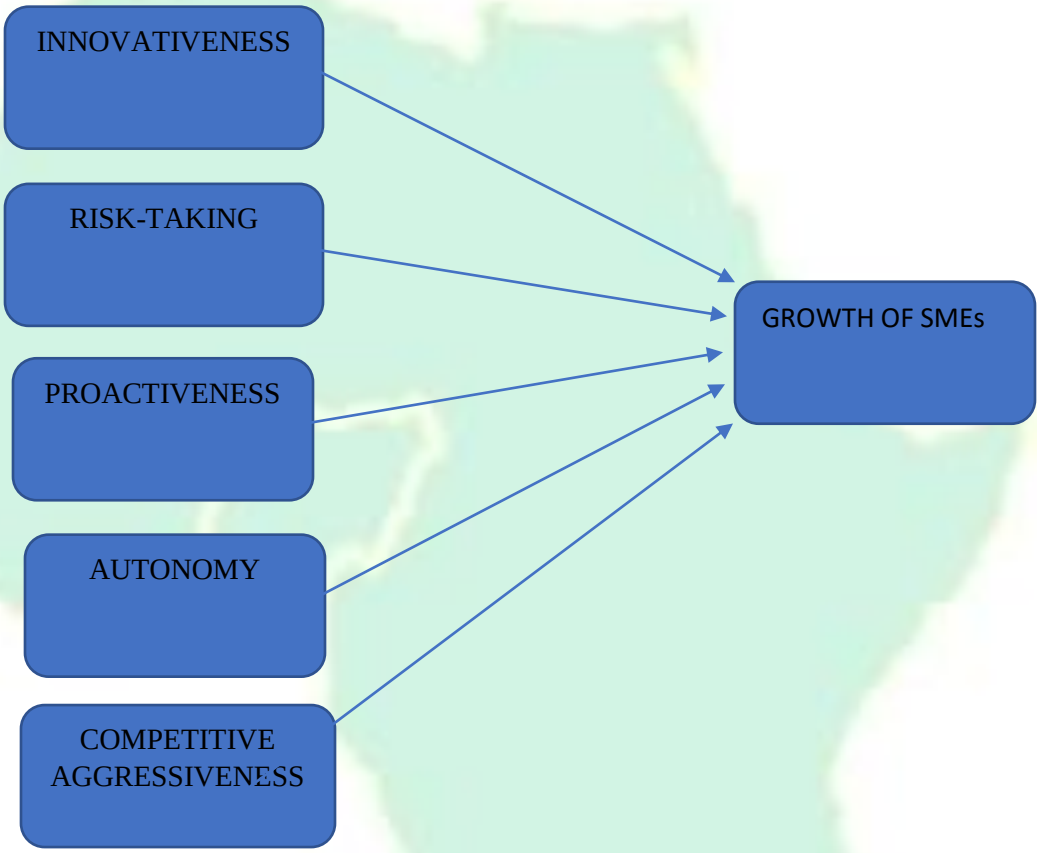
Competitive aggressiveness refers to how businesses respond to market trends and needs that already exist (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001). Competitive aggressiveness reflects a tendency toward outmaneuvering and outdoing competitors, as well as the intensity with which a company chooses to compete and efforts to outperform competitors (Hughes & Morgan, 2007; Saha et al., 2017). In a competitive marketplace, it is defined as a combative posture or aggressive response aimed at improving position or overcoming a threat (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). This aspect of EO is reactive, with a focus on maintaining a competitive position rather than building a new position or competitive advantage (Casillas & Moreno, 2010).

SMEs with an aggressive mindset is eager to go toe-to-toe with competitors, which may entail reducing prices and sacrificing profitability to gain market share, or spending aggressively to acquire growth capabilities. In an unpredictable economic environment like the COVID-19 pandemic, competitive aggressiveness as a means of SMEs development and expansion may entail being very assertive in leveraging the benefits of other entrepreneurial activities like innovativeness or proactiveness. Competitive aggression can be used by strategic SMEs to battle industry trends that threaten their existence or market position. Firms must sometimes be tenacious in defending the competitive advantage that has propelled them to the top of their industry (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Studies by Garba, et al (2019) indicate that competitive aggressiveness has a significant univariate effect on SMEs' growth across rural and urban areas. Similarly, studies by Casillas, et al (2010) show that there is a positive relationship between competitive aggressiveness and firm growth in second-generation family firms. Hence, we hypothesized that:

$H0_5$: *There is no significant relationship between competitive aggressiveness and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic.*

2.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Population and Sample

This study is a cross-sectional survey where the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SME growth was examined. The study population consists of all the SMEs in Plateau State. The unit of analysis was the owner-managers of the SMEs. There are one thousand, five hundred, and seventy-four (1574) SMEs in the state. The figure was obtained from SMEDAN & NBS National Micro Small and Medium Enterprise Survey 2017. Since the population of the study was large, adequate sample size was determined scientifically. The sample size was determined using Yamene's (1967) formula for determining sample size in the social sciences. The formula is expressed as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

N = Population Size
n = Appropriate sample size
e = Margin of error
1 = Constant

Thus,

$$n = \frac{1{,}574}{1 + 1574(0.05)^2}$$

n = 319 respondents

Therefore, the sample size for the research is 319 SMEs.

3.1.2 Procedures

The study used a simple random sampling technique, where individual respondents were randomly drawn. The data were collected through a personal approach. The data collection approach was chosen because the inefficient postal system and poor internet penetration in Nigeria could not allow the researchers to mail, email, or fax the questionnaire to the respondents. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed.

3.1.3 Measures

To guarantee reliable and valid measurement, scales from prior studies were adapted. The research adapted the questionnaire developed by Lumpkin and Dess (2001). The questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first part was about respondent's demographic information and the second part was about entrepreneurial orientation and SMEs growth. Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) was perceived as a multidimensional construct comprising of Innovativeness, Proactive, Risk-taking, Autonomy, and Competitive Aggressiveness. The questionnaire was a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)" which consists of 25 questions. The questionnaire was modified to include SMEs Growth to answer all the research questions. SMEs Growth was considered a unidimensional construct. The measure consisted of 5 questions. Unanswered questions were treated as missing values.

3.1.4 Common Method Variance

Using the Correlation Matrix Procedure, the Common Method Variance (CMV) for this study was calculated. The method of measuring CMV impact by latent variable correlations was described by Bagozzi, Yi, and Philips (1991): When there is a significant correlation between the primary constructs ($r > 0.9$), the common technique bias will be obvious. If the correlation between constructs is less than 0.9, CMV will not be a problem in any investigation (Bagozzi, et al, 1991). The correlation matrix in table

IV was used to determine the CMV for this investigation. The correlation amongst all the variables was found to be less than 0.9. As a result, CMV isn't a concern in this research.

3.1.5 Method of Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis method was adopted for this study with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Scientist (SPSS) version 23.0 software. When there are two or more independent variables, the equation describing such a relationship is the multiple regression equation (Kothari, 2004). Multiple regressions consist of two or more independent variables and one dependent variable. In this research, there are 5 independent variables (Innovation, Risk-taking, Pro-activeness, Autonomy, and Competitive Aggressiveness) and one dependent variable (SMEs Growth).

Table I: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Gender	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Male	232	75.6
Female	75	24.4
Total	307	100.0
Age		
26-35	54	17.6
36-45	109	35.5
46 years and above	144	46.9
Total	307	100.0
Marital Status		
Single	55	17.9
Married	229	74.6
Divorce	7	2.3
Separated	16	h5.02
Total	307	100.0
Highest Educational Level		
First School Leaving Certificate	12	3.9
SSCE	79	25.7
OND/NCE	106	34.6
B.SC/HND	93	30.3
Masters and above	17	5.5
Total	307	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2020

3.1.6 Respondents Profile

The sample characteristics reveal that males were more (75.6%) than females (24.4%), where most of them were 46 years and above (46.9%). Also, the majority of the respondents (74.6%) were married and most of them (34.6%) were holders of the National Diploma (ND)/National Certificate of Education (NCE). This means that most of the respondents had OND/NCE which makes them sufficiently educated to answer the questionnaire.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Data Analysis

To evaluate our measurement model, convergent and discriminant validity were assessed. Convergent validity measures the degree to which multiple indicators evaluating the same concept agree (Henseler et al., 2016). This was achieved by examining the factor loading and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each indicator. The results presented in Table II show that loading for all items surpassed the recommended value of 0.5 (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017), therefore the criterion is not violated. Meanwhile, some items (RT2 and RT3) were removed from risk-taking due to low factor loading.

Table II: Exploratory Factor Analysis Indicating Factor Loading, AVE and Reliability Results

Variables	Factor Loading	AVE	Reliability
A1	.702		
A2	.840		
A3	.906		
A4	.705	.630	.753
I1	.803		
I2	.832		
I3	.679		
I4	.805		
I5	.712		
I6	.825	.606	.796
P1	.879		
P2	.804		
P3	.731		
P4	.609	.581	.826
RT1	.729		
RT4	.506		
RT5	.840		
RT6	.906	.578	.755
CA1	.675		
CA2	.748		
CA3	.841		
CA4	.816		
CA5	.754	.591	.721
G1	.707		
G2	.836		
G3	.896		
G4	.564		
G5	.538	.522	.706

Note: RT2 and RT3 were deleted for low factor loading

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure (KMO) of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's (1954) Test of Sphericity was calculated to ascertain whether the questionnaire items yield unique and reliable factors. For the dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation, the results show that Autonomy has KMO = 0.705, Bartlett Test of Sphericity = 341.462 and Total Variance Explained = 57.632%; Innovation has KMO = 0.664, Bartlett Test of Sphericity = 117.984 and Total Variance Explained = 45.344%; Proactiveness has KMO = 0.694, Bartlett Test of Sphericity = 271.463 and Total Variance Explained = 54.956%; Risk-Taking has KMO = 0.502, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 37.093 and Total Variance Explained = 59.892%; and Competitive Aggressiveness has KMO = 0.673, Bartlett Test of Sphericity = 166.662 and Total Variance Explained = 39.986% . For SMEs Growth, the results indicate that KMO = 0.609, Bartlett Test of Sphericity = 197.961, and Total Variance Explained = 39.907%. Overall KMO values ≥ .70 are desired (Hoelzle & Meyer, 2013; Lloret et al., 2017), but values less than .50 are generally considered unacceptable (Child, 2006; Hair et al., 2010; Watkins, 2018). Therefore, it was determined that the correlation matrix was appropriate for factor analysis.

Cronbach's α coefficient was calculated to ascertain the internal consistency of the scales of the variables. The results indicate that the standard Cronbach's coefficient for all the scales were found to be above 0.7 recommended by Nunnaly and Bernstein (1994): Autonomy α = .753; Innovativeness α = .796; Proactiveness α = .826; Risk-Taking α = .755; Competitive Aggressiveness α = .721 and SMEs Growth α = 0.706.

Table III: Correlations

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Innovativeness	RiskTaking	Proactiveness	Autonomy	Competitiveagg	SMEs Growth
Innovativeness	4.0858	.50817	1					
Risk-Taking	4.1824	.49807	.392**	1				
Proactiveness	3.9446	.77322	.411**	.356**	1			
Autonomy	3.9414	.78813	.636**	.786**	.385**	1		
Competitiveagg	4.0936	.61169	.762**	.414**	.326**	.692**	1	
SMEs Growth	3.9389	.70547	.603**	.427**	.781**	.517**	.420**	1

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

The results in table III showed the correlations among the study variables. The correlations reveal many important findings. There was a strong positive association between Innovativeness and SMEs Growth (r = .603, p<0.01). Risk-taking was significantly correlated with SMEs Growth (r = .427, p<0.01). Proactiveness was positively and significantly associated with SMEs Growth r = .7813, p<0.01). The correlation between Autonomy and SMEs Growth was positively moderate and significant (r = .517, p<0.01). Moreover, there was a positive significant association between Competitive Aggressiveness and SMEs Growth r = .420, p<0.01).

The regression results indicate an R^2 value of .723 which means that 72.3% variation in SMEs' growth during the COVID-19 pandemic could be explained by Innovativeness, Risk-taking, Proactiveness, Autonomy, and Competitive Aggressiveness. The other 27.7% could be explained by other variables outside the scope of this study.

Table IV: Result of Path Coefficient

Hypotheses	Relationship	**B**	Std **β**	t - stat	Sig.	Decision	VIF
$H0_1$	Innovation→Growth	.547	.394	7.936	.000	Supported	2.679
$H0_2$	Risk-Taking→Growth	.020	.014	.272	.786	Not supported	2.947
$H0_3$	Proactiveness→Growth	.564	.619	18.084	.000	Supported	1.273
$H0_4$	Autonomy→Growth	.134	.149	2.254	.025	Supported	4.770
$H0_5$	CompetiAgg.→Growth	-.220	-.191	-3.631	.000	supported	3.008

Notes: CompetiAgg means Competitive Aggressiveness

Results of path analysis in line with hypothesized relationships were evaluated in Table IV. Findings reveal that: (H1) the relationship that links innovativeness and SMEs growth yielded a β = 0.394, t-value = 7.936, sig. value = .000. This signifies that the hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between innovation and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic is supported. The difference is statistically significant. That is, for every one standard deviation increase in innovation, SMEs grow by a standard deviation of 0.394. (H2) The relationship connecting risk-taking and growth of SMEs shows β = 0.014, t-value = .272 sig. value = .786. This means that the hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between risk-taking and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic is not supported. The difference is not statistically significant. For every one standard deviation increase in risk-taking, SMEs grow by a meager standard deviation of 0.014. (H3). The link between proactivity and SMEs growth revealed β = .619, t-value =18.084, sig. value = .000. The hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between proactivity and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic is strongly supported. The difference is statistically significant. For every one standard deviation increase in proactivity, there is a positive increase in growth by a standard deviation of .619. (H4) The connection between autonomy and SMEs growth yields a β = .149, t-value = 2.254, sig. value = .025. The hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between autonomy and SMEs growth in the COVID-19 pandemic is supported. The difference is statistically significant. For every one standard deviation increase in autonomy, there is a positive increase in growth by a standard deviation of .149. (H5) The link between competitive aggressiveness and SMEs growth reveals a β = -.191, t-value = -3.631, sig. value = .000. The difference is statistically significant. This means that the hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between competitive aggressiveness and SMEs growth in the COVID-19 pandemic is supported. For every one standard deviation decrease in competitive aggressiveness, growth would decrease by a standard deviation of 0.191.

What these results revealed is that there is a significant relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SMEs growth in the COVID-19 pandemic. However, risk-taking as a dimension of entrepreneurial orientation does not influence SMEs' growth in the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, entrepreneurial orientation dimensions such as innovativeness, proactivity, autonomy, and competitive aggressiveness do have a strong positive relationship with SMEs growth in the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

This research found several findings that contribute to the literature on entrepreneurial orientations and SMEs' growth. It was discovered that there is a significant relationship between innovativeness and the growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a well-known fact that the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected the operations of SMEs across the globe as a result of lockdown measures imposed by governments in order to halt the spread of the virus. This made several businesses to think outside the box to survive. SMEs that were innovative in their processes, techniques, and/or discover new markets or improve existing products witnessed growth. This finding agrees with Duru, Ehidiamhen, & Chijioke (2018) who found that that innovativeness exerted a positive and statistically significant impact on the performance of SMEs in Abuja, Nigeria.

The research also established that there is no significant relationship between risk-taking and the growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic cast a shadow of uncertainty over the entire economic landscape, where entrepreneurs and managers of SMEs faced life existential threats and business existential threats. In such dire situations characterized by the gloomy, frightening, morbid, and poor economic outlook, investing in high-risk projects, encouraging employees to take the risk with new ideas, and emphasizing both exploration and experimentation for opportunities do not improve the growth of the SMEs. Taking uncalculated risk is known to dwarf the growth of some organizations and in some cases, lead to the death of the organization. This finding agrees with Nwugballa, Elom, & Onyeizugbe (2016) who found that risk-taking had no significant correlation with any of the performance measures including growth.

It was further found that there is a substantial relationship between pro-activeness and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic. It is quite clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is not going anywhere soon. Even with the mass vaccination around the world, countries are witnessing a spike in the number of cases necessitating lockdowns in several cities. Hence, SMEs owners and managers who are proactive in their activities are expected to grow their businesses. This finding also agrees with Taiwo, et al. (2019) who found that pro-activeness has a positive significant effect on growth.

It was also discovered that there is a significant relationship between autonomy and growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, the entrepreneurial orientation of autonomy exhibited by entrepreneurs and managers of SMEs do influence business growth in the pandemic. Autonomy is one of the most important foundations for innovative and entrepreneurial behavior. The social distancing measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus enhanced the capacity of entrepreneurs and managers of SMEs to act independently in pursuit of their growth goals. This finding agrees with

several studies that demonstrate a favorable association between autonomy and growth, Casillas & Moreno, 2010; Garba et al., 2019; Gupta, 2019).

The research also established that there is a significant relationship between competitive aggressiveness and the growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic. The competitive aggressiveness of SMEs owners or managers significantly improves the growth of the business. This finding is in line with findings by Musawa & Ahmad (2018) who found that competitive aggressiveness enables a firm to act resourcefully and organize its resources in a way that contributes to marketing innovation performance.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have serious implications for theory, practice, and policy. From the theoretical lens, this study contributes to the existing literature by revealing the role of entrepreneurial orientation as a predictor in explaining the growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic in SMEs in Plateau State. Still from the vistas of theory, Al-Mamary et al. (2020) had argued that the tendency of businesses to act autonomously, innovatively, competitively aggressive, take risks and proactively take initiatives to exploit potential market conditions is crucial in explaining the growth of SMEs. Hence, the insignificant relationship between risk-taking and growth of SMEs was not expected. We had thought that since the COVID-19 pandemic poses a general risk to all SMEs, it would seem natural that those SMEs capable of taking on higher-risk initiatives will gain a greater benefit in the form of increased growth. However, results from this research reveal that entrepreneurial orientation has a relationship with SMEs growth in the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, innovativeness, proactiveness, autonomy and competitive aggressiveness are the dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation that were found to have a significant relationship with SMEs' growth in the pandemic.

From a practical point of view, entrepreneurs and managers of SMEs in Plateau State should enhance their entrepreneurial orientation practice of innovativeness, proactiveness, autonomy, and competitive aggressiveness to grow their business and reduce the rate of business failure in the state. Especially, in the still ravaging COVID-19 pandemic. Also, risk-taking, activities such as investing in high-risk projects, encouraging employees to take the risk with new ideas, and emphasizing both exploration and experimentation for opportunities in the COVID-19 pandemic should be discouraged due to the uncertain economic outlook.

From a policy perspective, there is a need for the creation of an agency saddled with the mandate of entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurial orientation of the state. We believe that when managers, owners of SMEs, and the entire citizenry is armed with sound practical entrepreneurial education and improved entrepreneurial orientation the state could witness explosive SMEs' growth.

5.1 Limitation and Suggestions for Further Study

Like in most researches, this study is not without its drawbacks. One of the weaknesses of this research is that a cross-sectional self-response questionnaire was used. Scholars have voiced their reservations with this research designed (Podsakoff et al., 2003). A cross-sectional study of this nature could not tell a full story of the impact of entrepreneurial orientation on the growth of SMEs. We suggest that future scholars should adopt either the mixed method or qualitative approach to give a more context-specific explanation to the hypothesized relationship between entrepreneurial orientational orientation and SMEs growth in the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, the trajectory of COVID-19 is showing that the virus is not leaving any time soon, as it keeps mutating and spiking the number of cases in several countries around the world. That means that a one-off study could only tell a one-off result. Hence, we suggest that scholars could do a longitudinal study to track the trend of the impact of entrepreneurial orientation on the growth of SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, this study was conducted in an environment and the environment is bedeviled by insecurity. These factors could have watered down the relationship between risk-taking and SMEs' growth. Future researchers could find the mediating role of environment and insecurity in explaining the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SMEs' growth.

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