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Linking ambidextrous leadership and small and medium scale enterprises export performance

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Purpose: This article focuses on the mediating role of innovation orientation and the moderating role of organisational trust (OT) on the relationship between ambidextrous leadership (AL) and export performance (EP). The need to highlight the drivers of AL and its influence on EP necessitated this study.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors subjected sample data set from 420 respondents that engage in direct and indirect export activities to inferential analysis using partial least square (SEM).

Findings/results: This study reveals that innovation orientation mediates AL and EP, as the direct link was not significant and organisation trust moderates the relationship.

Practical implications: Leaders' ambidexterity should incorporate a clearly defined orientation towards innovation that supports knowledge sharing and guides the need for innovative support while also ensuring that employees have high trust in the organisation.

Originality/value: This study validates the leadership complexity theory and adds to EP literature on the relevance of innovation orientation and OT as good predictors of EP.

Keywords: ambidextrous leadership; innovation orientation; SMEs' export performance; organisational trust; knowledge structure; developing economies.

Introduction

There is growing attention and support for small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) from emerging economies to engage in export activities. This is because it is not only directly beneficial to the firm but also valuable for the home country. In Nigeria, the government has decried the inability of SMEs to take advantage of its incentives to explore new markets. Aside from SMEs in the oil and gas sector, most SMEs' export performance (EP) has relatively been low and discouraging. Abubakar (2012) opined that leadership behaviour accounts for poor SMEs EP in developing economies. Adebayo et al. (2019) held that export activities could be expensive and difficult for SMEs given the inherent challenges in both their internal and external environment, thus surviving will demand leadership approach that is ambidextrous in steering organisational resources towards innovation that will lead to increased performance.

Rosing et al. (2011) opined that ambidextrous leadership (AL) is the ability of the leader to have a variance in behaviour that could be opening, which is exploration, closing, which is exploitation or a combination of both, which is flexible behaviour all aimed at innovation. Probst et al. (2011) suggested that an ambidextrous leader can exploit and explore existing competencies and new opportunities with the same level of commitment.

However, researchers have argued on leader's ability to achieve a balance that will produce meaningful outcome and avoid contradictions that are likely to disrupt its implementation because both exploratory and exploitative have different approaches (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Probst et al., 2011). Probst et al. (2011) believed that leadership ambidexterity poses a challenge, as it is demanding because of individual complexities and a need for greater resource capability, which most SMEs do not have in emerging economies.

However, leader's ambidexterity could be most effective in SMEs in the existence of a balance between the firm's proposed new activities and the existing activities through the holistic strategic process taking into cognisance both long and short effects (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004). Thus, the need for an innovation-oriented knowledge structure (KS) that is strategically focused towards learning, sharing and unification of its functional activities and strategies towards building competencies for improved innovation and better performance (Kraiczy et al., 2015).

There are varying perspectives on innovation orientation; however, this article aligns with the multidimensional perspective of innovation orientation that views the construct as an organisational KS and sees innovation as the outcome of innovation orientation (Siguaw et al., 2006). There are paucities of studies that have assessed innovation orientation as a multidimensional construct, thus it has become necessary to advance this strand of scholarship in view of the fact that approaching innovation orientation as a unidimensional construct, only limits scholarly understanding and practical relevance of the concept to businesses (Siguaw, 2006; Worren et al., 2002). In addition, there is little empirical evidence on the role of innovation orientation in AL and EP relationship, despite the knowledge that an organisation-wide orientation towards innovation is fundamental to a successful AL.

Furthermore, ambidextrous leaders strive to innovate but this outcome could be impossible in the absence of employees' trust for their organisation (Tuan Luu, 2017). The variance in behaviour could raise suspicion among employees, thereby creating doubt that could affect their commitment to the organisation. Thus, justifying the need for assessing how organisational trust (OT) interacts with the link between AL and EP. Previous studies emphasised more on employees' trust in leaders; however, this article is more concerned with trust in the organisation and sought to explain its link to EP. This is because trust in the organisation is relatively more difficult to build (Sitkin, 1995). However, when built, it portends greater benefit to the organisation and the employees alike.

The need for theory building on AL given the absence of theories primarily explaining the construct (Alghamdi, 2018) and broadening researcher's knowledge on the study construct was another value of this study and effort was made to explain the relationship between the constructs using a multi-theoretical approach of complexity leadership theory and the resource-based view (RBV) theory. In addition, the study to the best of the researchers' knowledge is the first of its kind in Nigeria that have attempted to link AL and EP, and determine what accounts for behaviour variance, which remains under-researched in developing economies, given that leaders' exploration, exploitation or simultaneously pursuing both behaviours can be ambiguous and conflicting. The study is a clear departure from previous studies that have focused more on well-known developing economies such as India and Malaysia (Alghamdi, 2018; Chebbi et al., 2017). Hence, keeping this in mind, the authors attempted to present an outcome from an under-researched culture and internationalisation perspective because developing countries are not homogenous, thus justifying the need to assess the mediating role of innovation orientation on the relationship between AL and EP.

Literature review

Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

This study used the leadership complexity theory as a theoretical lens for this study and supported it with the RBV theory. The complexity leadership theory is a response call for a new leadership approach from a system perspective considering the complex interrelations in the organisation because of the inability of traditional leadership to fit within the narrow boundaries of modern organisations (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Turner & Baker, 2017). The theory is premised on the need for having a system thinking approach to leadership, as it allows the leader to influence events to the benefit of the organisation. Approaching AL from the understanding that the organisation is a complex system allows the leaders to build a strategic and systemic KS towards innovation, thus adopting the same as a guide towards behaviour variance to innovation that will culminate in increased performance.

The complexity leadership theory also supports integrating leadership behaviour and organisational outcome to understand innovation through its advocacy of a complex adaptive system. This is simply about connectedness among the functional resources of an organisation (Goldstein, 2008; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008; Uhl-Bien et al., 2008). Lord (2008) stated that the developed connectedness to the organisation's agents (employees) in the system allows the leaders to have a comprehensive understanding of what possible behaviour variance would lead to achieving its goal, hence making the use of force unnecessary. This theory provides an answer to what determines what behaviour variance to be adopted and how it translates to increased performance.

Clarke (2013) stated that the theory advocates for leadership from the social capital perspective, that is, leadership that allows employees to build trust in the organisation, which will invariably lead to improved performance. The shared leadership premise of the theory would account for a greater level of trust, thus limiting the possibility of employee's suspicion of the leader's behaviour variance. Leaders' behaviour variance through the complexity lens supports the need to consistently take behaviour that shapes the context of the organisation to be adaptive and evolving towards the organisation's overall goal. Leaders should be able to encourage employees to evolve in their process to gain new ideas through exploratory behaviour and should be able to make the employees adapt through exploitative behaviour to align them to the organisational goals and objectives.

Keller and Weibler (2014) opined that the primary concern for a leader's ambidextrous behaviour is innovation; however, Trong Tuan (2017) held that the success of the behaviour variance depends on the ability to align organisation's internal resources successfully. Organisation's

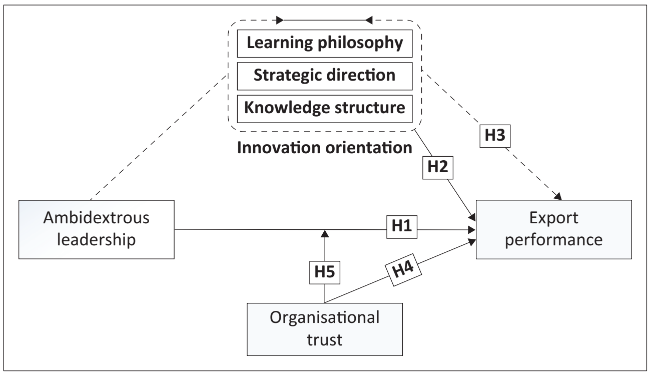


FIGURE 1: Conceptual model on ambidextrous leadership, innovation orientation and export performance: Moderating role of organization trust.

internal resources have been described as a fundamental tool for increased competitive advantage (Norris & Ciesielska, 2019), which is the core assumption of the RBV used in this paper as a supporting theory. The RBV holds that an organisation's ticket to gaining increased competitive advantage is its rare, imperfectly imitable, immobile, non-substitutable internal resources at its disposal (Barney, 2001; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002).

This study used this theory to link AL and EP relationship because greater AL is critical to its internal resources, as the resources are core internal determinants that account for improved EP. Leaders' ambidextrous behaviour success is a function of the quality of its internal resources to provide the organisation innovation through exploration when it is in need, restricting itself towards developing existing innovation through exploitation and balancing the same towards ensuring that the innovation leads to increased performance. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the study.

Ambidextrous leadership

Rosing et al. (2011) stated that a leader can be said to be ambidextrous based on three major actions. Firstly, they are explorative, showing an open behaviour to support employees to act ambidextrously. Secondly, they are exploitative, that is, showing a closed behaviour towards employees acting ambidextrously, and thirdly, they ensure a flexible switch between the behaviours as the event demands. Jansen et al. (2009) stated that ambidextrous leaders exhibit the capacity to combine diverse multilevel of learning processes that support exploration and exploitation, which allows for effectively and simultaneously undertaking diverse activities in the organisation's interest.

Alghamdi (2018) held that exploration is exhibited through an increase in the leader's support or variance of employee's behaviour to be innovative, which is carried out through an open leadership behaviour that encourages employees to take actions and initiatives that are in the organisation's interest. The opening leader's behaviour is expected to drive employee's exploration activities in the organisation (Zacher & Rosing, 2015), thus giving them the confidence to contribute actively to the overall goal attainment of the organisation. This behaviour gives room for employees to question situations and events and constructively contribute towards fostering an innovative system that will drive the performance of the organisation.

The leader exhibits a closing behaviour through promoting exploitative activities, that is, reducing employee's behaviours variance in the organisation (Trong Tuan, 2017). A reduction in behaviour approach of an ambidextrous leader. (Keller & Weibler, 2014). The closing behaviours of the leader supports employees to work within the confines of the organisation's template of operation and they are not expected to be creative or daring. It is more of a cautionary approach to leadership that supports adherence to established rules of operation, uniform task accomplishment, a hierarchical structure through the control function of management (Trong Tuan, 2017).

However, it remains inconclusive on what are the drivers or what circumstances should necessitate a leader's behaviour, although Rosing et al. (2011) suggested the need for flexibility given the absence of proof of the time that either approach should be adopted. However, Zacher and Rosing (2015) stated that the nature and structure of the work are fundamental to the choice of action of the leader and support for their employees in the organisations. Chi (2012) opined that there is need for a combination of the leader's varying behaviour, as the complementary behaviours adapted should be flexible, while also taking into cognisance the demands of the innovation need and orientation of the organisation.

Innovation orientation

Recently, there is a growing amount of literature on innovation orientation among scholars, and this could be because of the need to understand what makes up innovation at an organisation's system level and its characteristics (Nagy, 2014; Siguaw et al., 2006). This clarification has become necessary to align perspectives on the firm's level innovation and the need to avoid the growing inconsistency in the construct's operationalisation (Garcia & Calantone, 2002).

Several studies have viewed innovation orientation as a culture, belief, and action (Calantone et al., 2003; Moorman & Slotegraaf, 1999). However, Siguaw et al. (2006) differed considerably by opining that innovation orientation is a multidimensional construct that involves a firm's overall KS that takes into cognisance the values, strategic direction (SD) and the learning philosophy (LP) of the organisations, which is directed towards ensuring the overall organisational strategies and actions, both formal and informal, supports new thinking and expedites development, evolution and implementation.

This article aligns with the views of Siguaw et al. (2006) that innovation orientation is a KS with an ever-changing set of goals, rather than belief and action. Firstly, they conceptualise it as a transfunctional belief that is concerned with the functional interactions and connection between the organisation's functional units on intending and prospective innovative ideas that will be beneficial to the organisations. Secondly, it includes the SD, which is a deliberate, intentional and articulated organisational wide strategies that are intended towards innovation support and implementation (Nagy, 2014). Thirdly, it involves the LP, that is, viewed as organisation's proactiveness to innovative risk, openness to innovation and creativity (Nagy, 2014; Siguaw et al., 2006).

Furthermore, Worren et al. (2002) held that an organisation's innovation orientation should be driven widely among all component units in the organisation to an extent that employees, as a key resource see it as part of their commitment and interest to the organisation. However, this is only possible when they have an in-depth understanding of the current and future plans of the organisation and see the need to be innovative not just as a requirement but more as a commitment to the goal of the organisation, given that it is part of the strategic and intentional policies of the organisation.

SMEs export performance

Export activities for SMEs differ significantly with large firms. There are varying views on what drives EP within SMEs, and these views have recently shaped the meaning of the concept (Bertrand, 2011; Hultman et al., 2011). However, there is an overwhelmingly common view that SMEs' EP is the outcome of the aggregates of the international activities over a period (Navarro-García et al., 2016). Also, SMEs' EP can be viewed as its overall return from its effort to gain international market and presence.

Azar and Drogendijk (2016) opined that accurately measuring SMEs' EP could be difficult, thus, leading to misleading information, as not all SMEs have the same international objective. However, this paper aligns with previous studies that have measured SMEs' EP using two measures, which is the objective and the subjective measure (Brouthers & Xu, 2002).

The objective measure of SMEs' EP is focused on evaluating the economic value that SMEs gain from engaging in export activities over a period (Chen et al., 2016). The objective performance measures are mainly on absolute value assessment, which is in terms of SMEs' export intensity, profit, sales growth and market performance (Ahamed & Skallerud, 2013; Maurel, 2009; Yi et al., 2013). However, the objective measure has been criticised for being too complicated to measure, as economic changes, war and political interference can influence firm's activities, which can lead to overstating or understating the EP of SMEs (Reuber & Fischer, 1997) and it also fails to consider entrant performance in terms of its objective (Diamantopoulos & Kakkos, 2007).

Similarly, subjective measures of SMEs' EP are non-economic measures that assesses the perception of employees with requisite knowledge on the export activities of the organisations, the extent the export overall objective of the organisation has been satisfied from both the customers perspective and that of the organisation and its partners (Brouthers & Xu, 2002; He & Wei, 2013; Li, 2010).

However, one major criticism of the subjective measure is its lack of objectivity, thus meaning that it is not devoid of human sentiment. While this is true to an extent it is also not correct as when the subjective measure is not made for comparative or tax-related activities, managers of small businesses are always willing to provide information that would improve their overall outcome (Isichei et al., 2020). Hence, this study measured EP using a combination of objective and subjective measure adapted from the study of Zou et al. (1998). The authors based the choice of this measure on the need to respond to call for a combination approach to measuring EP in SMEs, most especially from a developing economy perspective.

Organisational trust

The concept of trust is of great interest to researchers given its direct link to work attitude, which invariably affects organisational performance (Onyx & Bullen, 2000). The interest in understanding employees' trust in the organisation is growing because trust in the leaders may not translate to trust in the organisation, even though studies have shown there is a correlation between both OT and employees' trust in leaders (Guinot et al., 2013; Kramer & Lewicki, 2010). Lämsä and Pucetaite (2006) stated that trust in an organisation is vital to drive increased performance in the organisation and ensure they gain a competitive edge in their external market because the ability to develop a trusting relationship is valuable to both the employees and the employers.

Tan and Tan (2000) opined that OT is the general evaluation of employees' perceived trustworthiness of an organisation. In addition, Lazarus and Salem (2005) stated that OT is the extent that employees perceive and express confidence that organisations' actions are beneficial to them and their well-being. Organisational trust has been described as quite complicated and must be managed consciously because it is seemingly difficult to regain employee's trust when lost (Currall & Epstein, 2003). Hence, the organisation must be sincere with the employees, as employees know when the leaders are acting in their best interest (Gilbert & Tang, 1998).

Tyler and Degoey (1996) stated that trust is most vital for leaders of an organisation, as it saves them the stress of constantly explaining the reason for their actions to employees. Although the employees also benefit when they can trust their organisation. Trust in the organisation allows them to focus and improve their skills and build a career for themselves in an organisation. A lack of trust in the organisation can be expensive and create challenges in controlling activities, thereby leading to underperformance (Lazarus & Salem, 2005). There is a little or no resistance to change when the employees trust the organisation, as they work knowing that their interest is covered and secured.

Ambidextrous leadership and export performance

The SMEs use export as the major tool for internationalisation and this is because it allows them to leverage on certain benefits that come with either the direct or the indirect export (Golovko & Valentini, 2011). However, achieving success in their internationalisation drive comes with the need to provide the market with new ideas or develop a mechanism that gives them a comparative advantage (Altun, 2017) and ambidextrous leaders exhibit exploratory behaviour so the firm can gain new ideas, support experimentation and initiatives that would lead to positive organisation outcome. Chebbi et al. (2017) found a positive link between AL and a firm's internationalisation.

Furthermore, SMEs' leaders can also improve performance through refining current knowledge of the organisation (through exploitation) to suit the export market and gain increased performance (Alghamdi, 2018), as refining the knowledge will allow the organisation to be market-specific and provide products that suit their export market, which will lead to greater sales volume and product acceptability. The study of Trong Tuan (2017) found a positively related link between AL and operational performance. Hence, the authors propose that:

H1: The greater the extent of SMEs leader's ambidexterity, the greater their export performance

Influence of innovation orientation on ambidextrous leadership and export performance

The extent that an organisation can develop its KS to cater for its present and future innovative needs has been shown to have a significant effect on their performance (Meliá et al., 2010). In other words, to improve the EP of SMEs, there is a need for effective and efficient allocation of limited scarce resources (Exposito & Sanchis-Llopis, 2018); hence, innovation-oriented organisations would have higher EP when they allocate resources efficiently to innovative ideas (Loof & Heshmati, 2002) and ensure that the resources are provided towards developing and sustaining innovation activities in the organisation (Norris & Ciesielska, 2019). The study of Hitt et al. (1998) supported that higher level of innovation orientation predicts a higher level of organisations' performance. Similarly, the study of Villena-Manzanares and Souto-Pérez (2016) confirmed that achieving higher EP demands the existence of an orientation that is supportive to innovation and rewards same, thus leading to increased organisational learning and processes. Furthermore, Lachenmaier and Woessmann (2006) found that to succeed in the export market, there is a need for a greater level of innovation orientation. Hence, the authors propose that:

H2: The higher the innovation orientation, the higher the export performance of SMEs

Leaders' ambidexterity allows for variance in behaviours that are opening, closing, or flexible (Alghamdi, 2018). The variance in behaviour is predicated on the extent the SMEs leaders want to change things or maintain processes (Rosing et al., 2011), as exploratory behaviour would increase the quest for innovation, while exploitative behaviour would restrict actions (Zacher & Rosing, 2015). This variance in behaviour accounts for what the employees hold as the innovation dynamics of the organisation, as it avails them the KS and strategic guide that drives the future and the present innovation quest of the organisation because the entire ambidextrous process is often centred around leaders managing employees and their actions in the organisation, and Haddoud et al. (2018) found that employees and managerial actions are a determinant of EP.

The central goal of AL is innovation (Rosing et al., 2011); however, innovation that is not birthed out of a deliberate strategic intent of the leaders and not effectively communicated to the employees could be discontinuous and non-incremental (Siguaw et al., 2006), as such manager's behaviour that is based on their innovation preference should be in the overall interest of the organisation and communicated timely. This is because it ends up forming the collective understanding that orient or guide an organisation and its employees towards engaging in activities intended to lead to innovation in the organisation, as such, innovation orientation could be a derivative of the shared relationship between leader's ambidexterity and EP, as it accounts for the general shared beliefs, perspective about learning, future drive and export strategies of the organisation.

Also, Navarro-García et al. (2016) have shown that the internationalisation decision of SMEs and their EP is a function of their innovation drive, and leaders' ambidexterity allows for change or variance in behaviour (Rosing et al., 2011) and for this change in behaviour to increase EP, this article proposes that there is an inherent need for an orientation that supports organisational-wide KS that supports ever changing set of goals in the organisation. Kortmann (2014) found ambidexterity affects innovation orientation. Hence, the authors propose that:

H3: Innovation orientation positively mediates ambidextrous leadership and SMEs' export performance

Moderating influence of organisational trust on ambidextrous leadership and export performance

Navarro-García et al. (2016) stated that to improve the EP of SMEs there is a need to ensure that employees as an internal factor are critically active in the operational activities of the organisation and share in their internationalisation goals and objectives. Aryee et al. (2002) stated that to get employees to contribute actively and commit to the organisation's goals, there is a need for leaders to ensure that employees have a high level of trust on the organisation and its leaders, as trust makes them freely act in the organisation's interest and makes them sacrifice their interest for that of the organisation. The study of Mahmoud et al. (2020) found that trust significantly affects EP. Similarly, the study of Katsikeas et al. (2009) also confirmed that trust has a direct link with performance, also Breevaart and Zacher (2019) found a positive link between trust and leader's effectiveness. When employees have confidence that the EP would be beneficial to them, they will be willing to ensure that the organisations' external market has an impressive outcome. Hence, the authors propose that:

H4: Organisational trust is positively related to SMEs' export performance

Export performance is said to improve when there is increased innovation (Brouthers & Xu, 2002) and AL process is targeted towards innovation (Rosing et al., 2011). However, leader's ambidexterity drive for innovation could be weakened when misinterpreted by employees as too restrictive or too demanding on them. This could affect the outcome of the ambidextrous process and could make employees less interested in the organisation. However, when there is an existence of trust in the organisation, it helps to strengthen and act as a social lubricant that expedites interaction in an elusive and vital way.

Trust allows the employees to express confidence in the organisation and its leaders, which allows them to work towards the attainment of the organisational goals and objectives (Gilbert & Tang, 1998; Lazarus & Salem, 2005). The existence of high trust that the organisation has their interest at heart and that whatever decision taken would be in their favour would help reduce the conflict and ambiguities associated with variances in leader's behaviour. The study of Tuan Luu (2017) found that trust interacts in the link between AL and performance.

Change can be difficult and distrust has been found to account for resistance to change (Burke et al., 2007; Gillespie & Mann, 2004), as such leaders need employees to have high trust, so that their variance of exploratory or exploitative behaviour would not be resisted because when employees have a low level of trust, they are likely to resist leader's effort to switch behaviour, which could lead to a conflict of interest between the organisation and its employees. Zaheer et al. (1998) stated that high trust for organisation makes the employees to share knowledge and brainstorm on new ideas willingly. This would help to drive increased innovation, leading to higher performance, thus strengthening the leader's effort for innovation in the organisation. Hence, the authors propose that:

H5: Organisational trust positively moderates the effects of ambidextrous leadership on SMEs' export performance

Methodology

Data sources

The study focused on SMEs that are engaging in export activities, whether they adopted directly or indirectly. Survey design was adopted and this was because of the study problem that required information to be collected across a large sample of interest. To identify SMEs that engage in export activities and contacting them for participation in the survey, the study relied on the information from the Nigeria Export Promotion Council (NEPC) and the Nigerian Export Processing Zones Authority (NEPZA). Information from NEPZA allowed for the classifications of the SMEs into segments that the country has an international comparative advantage such as agribusiness and agro-allied, solid minerals and metals, oil and gas and light manufacturing services. The authors drew a total sample of 590 from across the four sectors. Aside from the criteria of registering with NEPC, it was also ensured that the organisation must have been engaging in export activities within the last 3 years and operates in at least one country in Europe, America, Africa and Asia. The bases for the criteria were to identify firms that are truly engaging in export activities. Convenient sampling technique was used and the author based this choice on the need to select firms that are willing to take part in the survey. The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire survey and the collection was between October 2019 and January 2020. The authors administered the questionnaires through an email address and self-administration using selected trained research personnel who were trained for 1 month. The analytical technique adopted was Partial Least Square structural equation model with the aid of SmartPLSv3.

Measures and assessment of variables

Innovation orientation

The authors relied on the conceptualisation of Siguaw et al. (2006) in designing the scale for innovation orientation. The eight items scale produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.721. Likert format that ranged from 1 (never supporting) to 5 (always supporting) was adopted. Sample of the questions were 'our organisation supports developing new ideas that will be beneficial to the organisation' and 'the organisation encourages the transfer of knowledge among all agents of the organisation'. The construct was approached as a higher-order formative construct, considering that it comprises three different dimensions (LP, SD and transfunctional beliefs). A pilot study was carried out, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal axis factoring with oblique rotation with a data set of 150 respondents. The result showed three factors loaded with eight items. The study followed Siguaw et al. (2006) conceptualisation in naming the factors as LP with three items, SD with two items and transfunctional beliefs with three items. The result confirms that innovation orientation is a multidimensional construct. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity proved significant (0.812, $p < 0.05$) (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

Ambidextrous leadership

This study used scale of Zacher and Rosing (2015) to measure AL. The scale was a five-point scale that ranges from 1 (not at all) to 5 (frequently, if not always). The scale has 14 items. The authors also approached this construct as a higher-order formative construct, considering that it comprises two different dimensions (closing behaviour and opening behaviours). Some samples of the scale are 'our organisation supports different ways of undertaking a task', 'our leaders encourage us to be independent in thinking and acting' and for the closing behaviour samples of the scale are 'there is a strict control on adherence and attainment of organisation's goal' and 'ensure compliance with rules'. As the independence and multidimensional nature of the construct have been confirmed sufficiently in literature, the authors conducted principal component factor analysis (PCA) and it produced two factors with each factor having seven items each, which is in line with extant literature. The internal consistency test produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.734.

Export performance

The study adapted the scale of Zou et al. (1998) in measuring EP. The scale was designed in a Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The instrument was perception-based although it has items that sought to measure both the subjective and the objective perceptive of the EP of SMEs. Sample of the items in the scale are 'our global competitiveness has increased with export activity', 'our export activities have met our expectations' and 'our organisation's export activities have increased sales volume'. The scale has nine items that were used to measure EP. The reliability test showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.814 and the PCA showed all items loading on a factor.

Organisational trust

The instrument measuring organisation trust had six items, while the study of Guinot et al. (2013) and Nyhan and Marlowe (1997) were adapted in designing the study's instrument. The authors designed the instrument in a Likert scale format that ranged from 5 (strongly agreed) to 1 (strongly disagreed), which was used to show the respondents' degree of trust for their organisation. Sample of the questions is 'I have absolute confidence that my organisations take full consideration of me', 'the perception I have about my organisation is positive'. A pilot study was conducted and principal component analysis result revealed all the items loaded unidimensionally under one factor; however, given that item 3 was below the factor score required of 0.70 (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), it was excluded, as such the scale was reduced further to five items. By using the internal consistency method of Cronbach's alpha the reliability of the five-item scales was 0.862.

In addition, as the authors adapted the items from existing theoretical researches, a confirmatory factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation was conducted. The outcome showed model fit with all criteria satisfying the required threshold (CMIN/DF = 3.162, $p < 0.05$, CFI = 0.921, RMSEA = 0.642, GIF = 0.948 and standardised root mean square [SRMR] = 0.019) (Hair et al., 2010).

Results

Out of 590 instruments distributed, the retrieved questionnaires were 510; however, preliminary analysis of the instrument found only 420 questionnaires suitable for the study. The 420 questionnaires account for 71% of the total instrument distributed. Thus, given it is a substantial percentage, the instruments were used for further analysis. One major factor that accounts for the high return rates was the authors' personal visits to the firms aside emails forwarded to assure them of confidentiality and objectivity of the study. Chi-square test for the difference was conducted to ascertain whether there was any significant difference in the early and late response. The result showed no significant difference $\chi^2 = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$. Furthermore, ANOVA was conducted to ascertain whether there was a statistically significant difference between the sectors that the study covered in terms of their size, age and internationalisation mode. The result showed there was a statistical difference as $F(420) = 4.6$, $p < 0.05$, however, despite statistical significance, the effect size was small (0.01) using Cohen (1988) criteria the difference would not have much effect on the outcome. G-power-v3 (Erdfelder, Faul, and Buchner [1996], Germany) was used to assess sample adequacy, and the result showed that sample of 155 was required to get 95% statistical power level, hence the suitable data set exceeded the result, therefore this requirement has been satisfied. The demographic distribution of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Measurement model

As Podsakoff et al. (2003) recommended, for assessing common method variance the research instrument was segmented into sections for both the independent and dependent variable, making it seemingly difficult to link the concepts. In addition, the scale formats differ and are not similar for all the variables. Finally, Harman's single-factor

TABLE 1: Demographic distribution of the respondents.

Demographic variable(s)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	214	51
Female	206	49
Total	420	100
Age (years)		
18–30	118	28
31–40	110	26
41–50	107	25
Over 50	85	20
Total	420	100
Export Experience		
5–10	260	62
11–15	77	18
16–20	68	16
Over 20	15	4
Total	420	100
Mode of Export		
Direct	137	33
Indirect	283	77
Total	420	100
Sector		
Agribusiness and Agro allied	196	47
Solid minerals and Metals	46	11
Oil and gas	110	26
Manufacturing services	68	16
Total	420	100

test was conducted (Harman, 1976) and the result from the factor analysis showed that none of the factors accounts for more than 50% of the variance. Thus, it implies the absence of common method bias. This study assessed the distribution of the data to determine whether it was normal and symmetrically distributed (Kline, 2005). The study adopted skewness and kurtosis test and the result shows that the data are normal given the skewness values were below 3 and kurtosis not above 8 as Kline (2005) recommended. Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010) that stated that factors below 0.70 should be dropped most especially when the model does not fit, as it could help to improve the model goodness of fit. The items for innovation orientation, AL, EP and OT were retained as all the factors loaded were above the threshold. The factor loadings are presented in Table 2.

The study used Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, rho_A and average variance extracted (AVE) to determine the reliability and convergent validity of the model. Hair et al. (2010) recommended that for Cronbach's alpha, rho_A and composite index should be > 0.70 and for AVE coefficient should be > 0.50. Hence, given that the result presented in Table 3 is in line with the recommendations, thus it implies that the measurement model is reliable having satisfied these criteria. A further check was carried out for multicollinearity because of second-order construct in the study using variance inflation factor (Latan & Noonan, 2017). Hence, following Kleinbaum et al. (1988) position that held that presence of values > 5 shows that the data have a multicollinearity problem. However, the assessment of the result showed that all the values were below the threshold.

Isichei et al. (2020) recommended further for discriminant validity to be assessed with Fornell-Larcker Criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The result shows that the composite AVE square root was greater than the correlation values. Further assessment using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) index indicates that the coefficients were less than 0.85, as Henseler et al. (2015) recommended.

Structural model

The confirmation of the reliability and validity of the model provided support for the assessment of the structural model result. The structural paths of the relationship between AL, innovation orientation and export performance are presented in Figure 2.

The result showed that the entire paths are positive and the path from AL to EP through innovation orientation showed the strongest unique contribution to explain the model. Assessing the coefficient of determination between the constructs, this study followed the views of Henseler and Chin (2010), who proposed 0.75 as high, 0.50 as moderate and 0.25 as weak. The extent that AL can influence changes in EP can be said to be moderate given that the *r*-value is 0.598.

TABLE 2: Measurement Result on Ambidextrous Leadership, Innovation Orientation, Organisational Trust and Export performance.

Construct	Factor Loadings			
Innovation Orientation				
Learning Philosophy ∞	**0.771**	-	-	-
LP1	0.774	-	-	-
LP2	0.895	-	-	-
LP3	0.828	-	-	-
Strategic Direction ∞	**0.770**	-	-	-
SD1	0.743	-	-	-
SD2	0.905	-	-	-
SD3	0.884	-	-	-
Transfunctional accumulation ∞	**0.716**	-	-	-
KS1	0.912	-	-	-
KS2	0.938	-	-	-
Cronbach Alpha ∞	**0.812**			
Ambidextrous Leadership				
AL1	-	0.713	-	-
AL2	-	0.710	-	-
AL3	-	0.786	-	-
AL4	-	0.714	-	-
AL5	-	0.774	-	-
AL6	-	0.769	-	-
AL7	-	0.748	-	-
AL8	-	0.709	-	-
AL9	-	0.775	-	-
AL10	-	0.712	-	-
AL11	-	0.773	-	-
AL12	-	0.785	-	-
AL13	-	0.750	-	-
AL14	-	0.712	-	-
Cronbach Alpha ∞	-	**0.878**	-	-
Organisational Trust				
OT1	-	-	0.761	-
OT2	-	-	0.768	-
OT3	-	-	0.807	-
OT4	-	-	0.780	-
OT5	-	-	0.762	-
Cronbach Alpha ∞	-	-	**0.905**	-
Export Performance				
EX1	-	-	-	0.790
EX2	-	-	-	0.771
EX3	-	-	-	0.763
EX4	-	-	-	0.809
EX5	-	-	-	0.704
EX6	-	-	-	0.831
EX7	-	-	-	0.795
EX8	-	-	-	0.849

Source: Result Output, 2020

LP, learning philosophy; SD, strategic direction; AL, ambidextrous leadership; OT, organisational trust; EP, export performance; KS, knowledge structure.

Innovation orientation as a second-order construct for all its dimensions also was robust.

The significance of the model was further assessed using the consistent PLS bootstrapping approach. The result shows that the entire paths are significant except the direct path between AL and EP. Figure 3 is a diagrammatical representation of the output showing the paths *t*-values. Furthermore, the predictive relevance of the model was assessed and following Chin's (1998) recommendation that a good predictive model is evident when the Q^2 value is > 0.

The result shows that the model has a good predictive relevance as the Q^2 value was 0.239.

Table 4 shows the summary of the result on the test of the hypothesis and further supports Figure 2. Hypothesis one was rejected as the t_v (1.721) was less than the threshold of 1.96 and $p < 0.05$. Thus, rejecting the hypothesis that the greater the extent of SMEs leader's ambidexterity, the greater their EP. The result confirms that hypothesis two should be accepted, as the t_v (24.029) was greater than 1.96 and the $p < 0.05$. The result also shows that innovation orientation mediates AL and EP relationship, as the t_v (3.311) was greater than 1.96 and $p < 0.05$. This study confirms that OT moderates the relationship between AL and EP, as the t_v (2.181) was greater than 1.96 and $p < 0.05$. Finally, OT positively influences EP, t_v (23.044) was greater than 1.96 and $p < 0.05$. In order to determine the model fit, SRMR was used and a coefficient of 0.04 was obtained. This implies the model has a good fit, as it is in line with the recommendations of Henseler et al. (2014) and Hu and Bentler (1998) held that for model fit, the SRMR should be < 0.08.

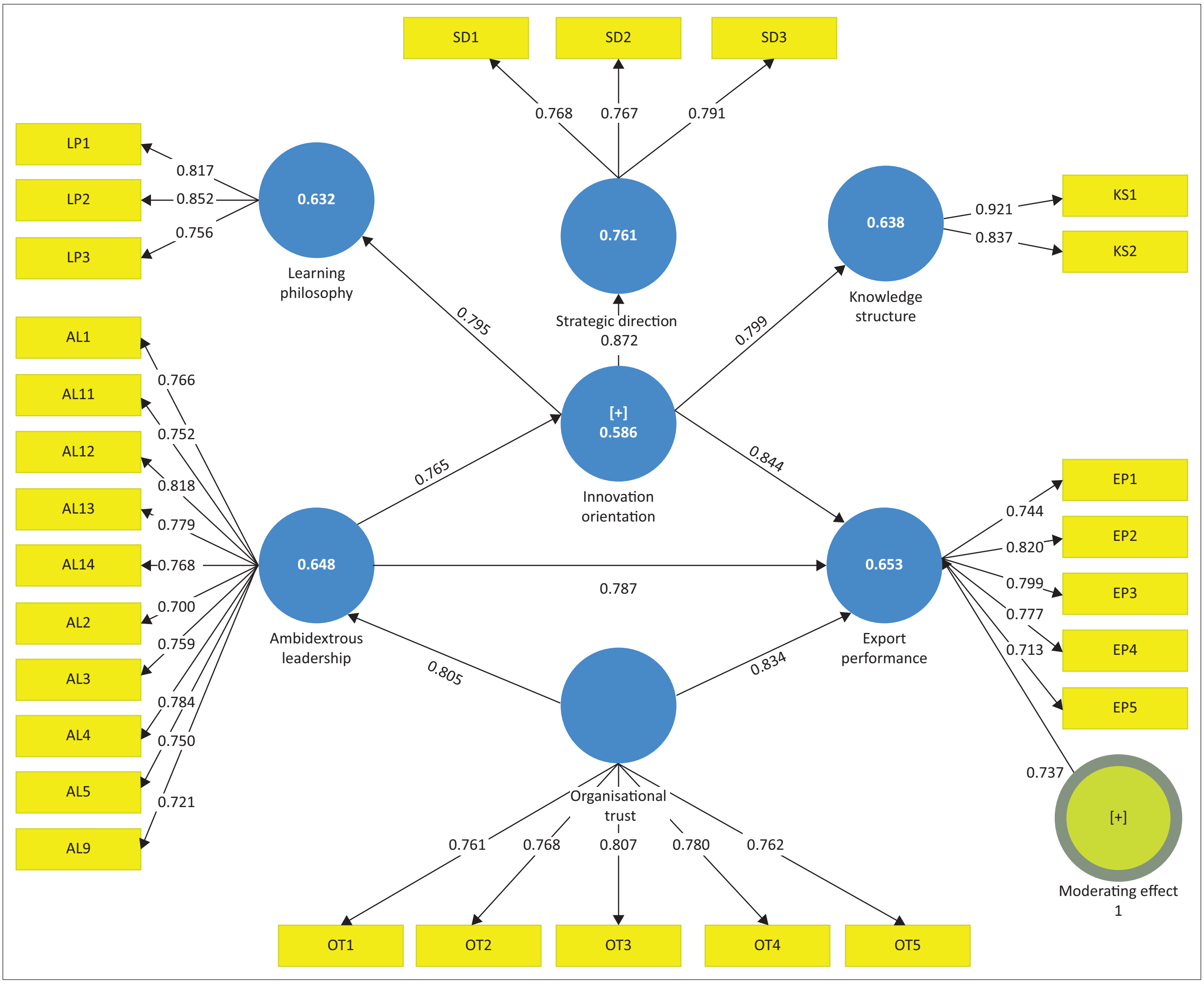
TABLE 3: Reliability Result.

Variables	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Innovation Orientation	0.825	0.860	0.637
Ambidextrous Leadership	0.885	0.901	0.863
Export Performance	0.731	0.823	0.885
Organisation Trust	0.791	0.856	0.881
Learning philosophy	0.790	0.821	0.903
Strategic direction	0.772	0.819	0.928
Transfunctional accumulation	0.773	0.872	0.962

AVE, average variance extracted.

Discussion of findings

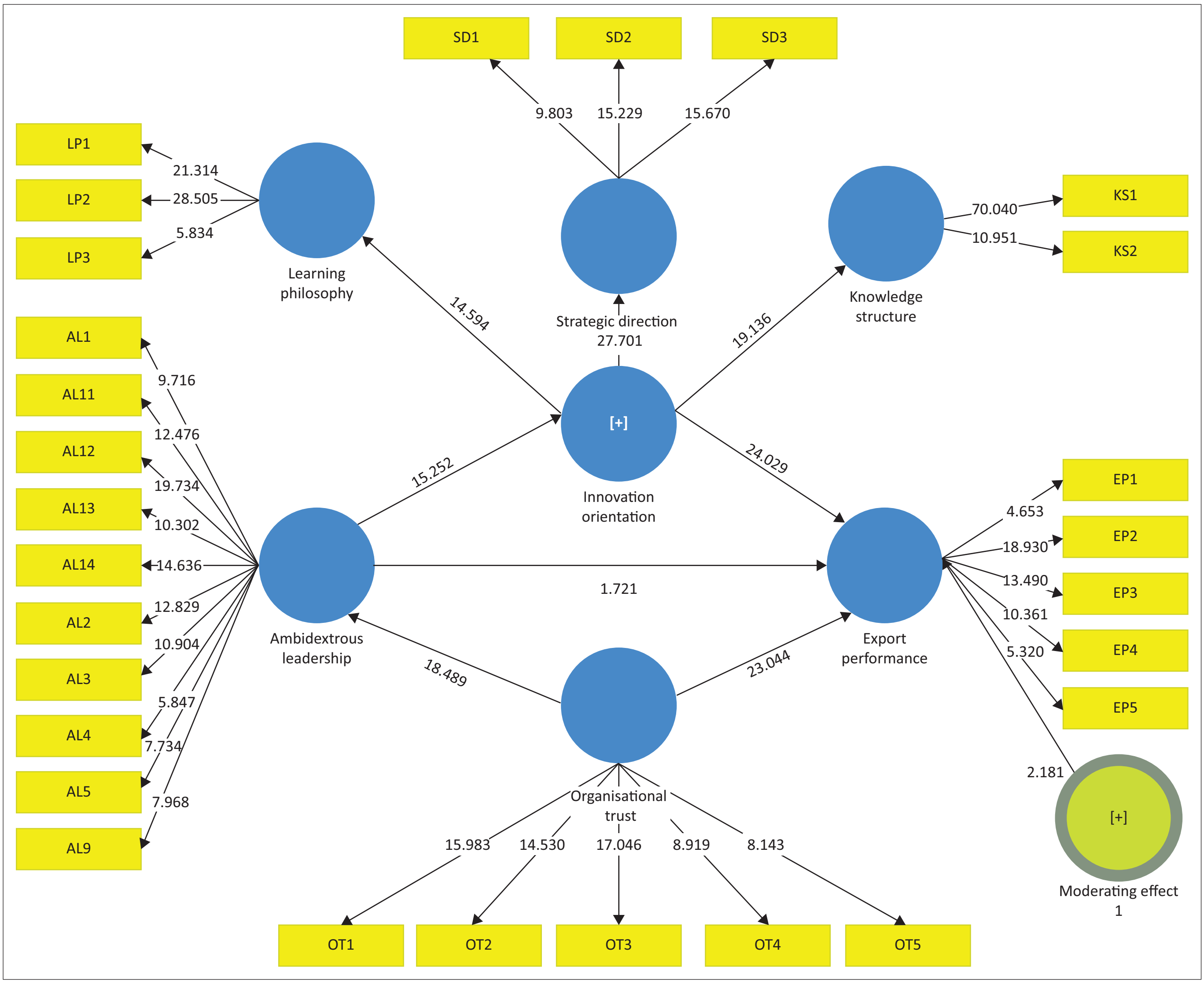
The focus of this article was on AL and SMEs' EP, although the relationship was mediated with innovation orientation and moderated with OT. The study confirmed that innovation orientation is a multidimensional construct, and it is more



Source: SmartPLS Output, 2020

SD, strategic direction; AL, ambidextrous leadership; LP, learning philosophy; OT, organisational trust; EP, export performance; KS, knowledge structure.

FIGURE 2: Structural path model.



Source: SmartPLS Result Output, 2020

SD, strategic direction; AL, ambidextrous leadership; LP, learning philosophy; OT, organisational trust; EP, export performance; KS, knowledge structure.

FIGURE 3: Significance model.

TABLE 4: Summary Result on Hypotheses on Ambidextrous Leadership, Innovation Orientation and Export Performance: Moderating role of Organisational Trust.

Hypotheses	(STDEV)	T-Statistics	*P*-value	Decision
H1				
Ambidextrous leadership -> Export performance	0.029	1.721	0.066	Rejected
H2				
Innovation Orientation -> Export Performance	0.092	24.029	0.000	Accepted
H3				
Ambidextrous leadership -> Innovation Orientation -> Export Performance	0.073	3.311	0.001	Accepted
H4				
Ambidextrous leadership* Organisational Trust -> Export Performance	0.081	2.181	0.023	Accepted
H5				
Organisational Trust -> Export Performance	0.076	23.044	0.000	Accepted

encompassing to the unidimensional innovativeness scale of entrepreneurial orientation commonly used by scholars. This is in line with the views of Siguaw et al. (2006) who opined that innovation orientation is best understood and measured as a multidimensional construct.

The study found that AL does not significantly predict SMEs' EP, despite the path was positive. This finding differs from the study of Trong Tuan (2017) who found that AL is directly linked to performance, although this difference in finding could be because of differences in the study dependent variables and location where the research was carried out. Similarly, the finding failed to align with the study of Alghamdi (2018) that found that AL has a direct positive influence on employee's innovative performance. This implies there could be other factors that could account for this relationship.

Furthermore, it was found that innovation orientation is critical for improving SMEs' EP. The outcome is consistent with the study of Simpson et al. (2006) that also found that innovation orientation has a direct and positive influence on organisation performance. The result is consistent with the views of Hitt et al. (1998) who advocated that for SMEs that desire success in their internationalisation process, there is a need for an orientation that is innovation centred, as it is critical to drive increased performance. This result is in line with the study of Villena-Manzanares and Souto-Pérez (2016) that found that EP is directly linked to an orientation towards innovation that an organisation holds.

In addition, the result shows that innovation orientation mediates the relationship between AL and EP. The result agrees with the views of Rosing et al. (2011) which held that as the outcome of innovation orientation is innovation and as the drive for AL is innovation, providing a balance towards the variance in the behaviour could be through defining the organisation's orientation towards innovation. This result also confirms the opinion of Trong Tuan (2017) that the extent to which leaders can be ambidextrous is contingent upon the orientation that the organisation holds towards innovation. This result implies that for AL to influence EP, it must be through the existence of a clearly defined innovation orientation.

It was confirmed that the link between OT and EP is significant and positive and the finding aligns with the study of Breevaart and Zacher (2019) that also showed that OT from employees is critical to drive increased EP. Employees are critical resources in a firm's international success (Makri et al., 2017); hence, there is a need for ensuring that their trust in the organisation is developed and sustained.

Finally, the study confirms that OT moderates the relationship between AL and EP. This result is consistent with the finding of Tuan Luu (2017) that found OT moderates AL and performance relationship. Similarly, the result supports the views of Aryee et al. (2002) that trust helps to strengthen AL and performance relationship. This implies that to strengthen the relationship between AL and EP, there is a need for a high level of trust for the organisations by the employees.

Implications for research and practice

This study provides significant implication for managers, theory and society. The study highlights the need for managers of SMEs to effectively establish and communicate their own preference of innovation and ensuring that there is an innovation trajectory that defines and articulates a SD towards developing a LP and building a KS that is directed towards ensuring innovative ideas are encouraged. Leader's ambidexterity must be within the confines of the pre-defined innovation orientation in order to yield expected organisational outcome.

In addition, the study provides answer to the question on what behaviour could be adopted and at what time through its advocating of a balance dimension in the leader's behaviour that leads to defining the orientation that the organisation holds towards innovation and ensuring that employees are carried along, which will help build trust in them and towards the organisation and would lead to increased EP.

Furthermore, managers of small businesses can understand that, more importantly, their actions as leaders are strategic to the growth of their business. This implies that for leaders to multitask in their activities successfully, there is a need for employees to trust the organisation. While it is identified that SMEs because of their limited resources are confronted with the challenge of successfully retaining talents, Navarro-García et al. (2016), and Srinivasan and Archana (2011) identified them as critical resources for EP success, thus the need for managers of SMEs to ensure that their behaviour is not a contributory factor for low trust level; hence, they need to ensure that their behaviour are not perceived suspiciously as it can affect the AL drive for innovation.

Theoretically, this article advances an integrative sequential model that explains the process that accounts for AL and EP in SMEs, which is a major contribution to the AL literature, most especially from a developing economy context. As a contribution to knowledge, this article presents a new empirical perspective to innovation orientation, as a multidimensional construct away from previous studies that have rather been mostly unidimensional. This would allow managers of SMEs to approach their innovation orientation from a multilayer perspective, thereby creating new and an encompassing approach towards ensuring that their firm remains innovative irrespective of challenges in both their internal and external environment.

In addition, this study provides a new overarching in-road to the EP literature through closing gaps in studies that have accounted for the process that explains managerial behaviour as a determinant of EP. This is important because complexities in a leader's behaviour have not clearly been accounted for in the EP literature and how to manage them towards innovation have remained elusive, which could explain the unclear interpretation of a leader's behaviour as a determinant of EP.

Furthermore, the study has provided evidential relevance of the need for a multitheoretical approach in understanding the complex nature of AL and EP. Hence, validating the leadership complexity theory and the resource-based theory. The study advances leadership complexity theory as a lens through which AL and EP can be explored, hence this article adds to scholarly knowledge and closes the gap in limited theories that explain AL.

The value of trust in society is further confirmed, as such organisations can learn that when external customers, just like the internal ones, can develop trust in them, it would likely account for increased performance. State institutions in developing economies can also benefit from the finding by ensuring that leader's actions are directed in such a manner that builds trust, as it is likely to influence overall development. Finally, the study has provided an empirically substantiated evidence from a developing economy context that AL can predict higher SMEs EP through innovation orientation, and OT can further strengthen the relationship.

Limitations and future research

The study was limited to the use of a questionnaire survey to gather the data that were used in this study, future studies could use longitudinal data for the study. The EP was measured using a perception scale of subjective and objective measures. Future studies on new entrant/nascent exporting firms are required given that this study was limited to firms that have a minimum operational period of 3 years. The study was further limited to SMEs in a developing economy; hence, future studies should consider a comparative analysis between SMEs and large firms and using data from developed and developing economies for assessing the relationships between the variables. Despite these limitations, this study portends immense relevance for organisational leadership and EP studies, especially related to reconnoitring its antecedents. Therefore, it is intended that this framework would provide guidance on future research on AL and EP, most especially in SMEs.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

E.E. conceived the research. A.A. and I.C. planned the research. E.E., K.E. and A.I. wrote the manuscript with support from M.N., I.C., and A.A. E.E. and I.C. conducted the data analysis, while A.I. and K.E. read the final manuscript after putting down the implication and limitations of the research.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [E.E], upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and they take full responsibility.

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