INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH
P-ISSN: 1118-4256, E-ISSN:3034-4327
Vol. 5| No.1 | June 2024
Page No.: 366-384

INDIGENOUS ENTREPRENEURIAL ORIENTATION AND ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS OF MICRO-BUSINESSES IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study determined the relationship between indigenous entrepreneurial orientation and economic competitiveness of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the relationship between apprentice mentorship and value creation as well as the relationship between apprentice mentorship and customer services of micro-businesses in Ebonyi state. A resource-based theory of the firm by Barney (1991) was adopted for the study. Data were generated using a questionnaire and administered to the respondents using the judgmental (Purposive) sampling technique. Analysis was done with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25 to generate the data frequency, percentages, standard deviation, and means while the hypotheses were tested using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The study found that there is a significant positive relationship between apprentice mentorship and value creation cum customer services. Based on the findings obtained, it was concluded that trying to replicate the successes of global markets using Eurocentric entrepreneurial orientations might not be feasible as contextual nuances affect businesses vis a viz their sustainability, growth, and success; hence, adoption of indigenous entrepreneurial orientations. The study recommended that indigenous entrepreneurs' micro businesses in Ebonyi's attention need to be focused on contextual peculiarities in their environments of operation to enable them practice needful and appropriate ideologies to survive and remain economically competitive. It was also recommended that Nigerian indigenous entrepreneurs need to adopt, develop, and practice contextualised ideologies like apprentice mentorship as they

were found to enhance business competitiveness as well as sustainability. These attributes can be utilised alongside already existing orientations found useful.

Key Words: *Apprentice Mentorship, Value Creation, Customer Service, Micro Businesses, Ebonyi State, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

The role of micro-businesses in driving economic growth and development cannot be exaggerated, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. Many of these micro-businesses, which are indigenously owned and operated, play a crucial role in addressing local economic needs, creating employment opportunities, and contributing to the state's overall economic competitiveness (Nkamnebe, 2021). These micro-businesses are not only major providers of employment and income for the common people but also breeding and nurturing grounds for entrepreneurship capacities, innovation, and managerial competencies for the development of the Indigenous Entrepreneurship Orientation (IEO). It is often characterised by its small scale, limited resources, and high informality, constituting a significant portion of the business landscape in Ebonyi State, Nigeria (Okon & Edet, 2021). They further noted that in the context of Nigeria, micro-businesses play a significant role in the country's economic landscape, contributing to job creation, poverty alleviation, and the diversification of the economy.

The concept of IEO has gained ground in the literature, highlighting the unique socio-cultural factors that shape the entrepreneurial mindset and behaviour of individuals from indigenous communities (Rezaei et al., 2020). Indigenous entrepreneurship orientation is characterised by a strong connection to traditional values, community-oriented decision-making, and the utilisation of indigenous knowledge and resources (Peredo & Chrisman, 2021). It is important to observe that the business environment has evolved (in a rapid and fast-paced trend) into a global (one-location-serves-all) entity such that economic and social issue(s) tend to look homogeneous world over (Jangid, 2022). Such occurrences lull

entrepreneurs into seeking, studying, and adopting orientations of successful entrepreneurs around the globe without taking the necessary care to contextualise them to fit their clime or prevalent economic and socio-cultural environment. These may well lead to failure because economic/political terrain, legal environment, socio-cultural inclinations, demography, and orientation of the indigenous entrepreneur differ one from the other and to a great extent affect the chances of survival of ventures (Singh, 2023). Mrabure, Ruwhiu, and Gray (2018) thought that indigenous entrepreneurial orientation (IEO) is the recognition of contextual factors that influence the mentality and behaviour of indigenous entrepreneurs

Ebonyi State, located in the South-East region of Nigeria, is home to a vibrant micro-business sector that is heavily influenced by the region's indigenous culture and entrepreneurial traditions (Nwankwo et al., 2020). These micro-businesses may have contributed to Ebonyi state economic competitiveness. Economic competitiveness to Cann (2016) is a factor-based measurement/comparison between key players using a similar set of indicators/indices (institutions, policies, and factors) to determine the level of performance in terms of acquisition of market share, profitability, long-term stability and growth used to upgrade the welfare and level of comfortable living enjoyed by people. This translates to mean that real potentials/capabilities leading to the birth of economic and societal achievers are harnessed on a competitive platform with components like value creation (VC), customer service (CS), technology acquisition, restricting of internal workings and staff training meant for maintaining and staying on the edge created (Ingram, 2023). Value creation is the additional worth cum benefits given by a business to its stakeholders in exchange for money to ensure continued patronage (Pahwa, 2023); while customer service is the assistance/support rendered to clients by a representative or agent of a business based on clarity or issue(s) with any of the organisation’s products and services (Rodgers and Mckinney, 2023).

Unfortunately, entrepreneurial orientation in use in our clime (Nigeria) as almost globally is at best Eurocentric, that is, scholarly ideologies of Western or developed countries' entrepreneurs. In such developed economies the adage "Dream it and have it" may have smooth sailing because the necessities to power innovations were provided. Such may not hold sway for a developing economy where almost everything operates under the "Trial and error" orbit. The practicalities of wholly adopting these Westernised orientations pose serious operational problems for any economy with different technicalities and terrain than the originating economy, more so, the success and competitiveness of the micro businesses. Arising from this is that most promising and budding enterprises (micro businesses in Ebonyi State inclusive) tend to fail at the teething stages. Given this, understanding the role of IEO in shaping the economic competitiveness of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State is crucial for developing targeted policies and interventions to support the growth and sustainability of this vital economic sector. Hence, this study aims to investigate the relationship between indigenous entrepreneurial orientation and the economic competitiveness of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Specifically, the study sought to

i) Determine the nature of relationship between apprentice mentorship and value creation of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State
ii) Ascertain the nature of relationship between apprentice mentorship and customer services of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State.

Research Questions

i) What is the nature of the relationship between apprentice mentorship and value creation of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State?
ii) What is the nature of relationship between apprentice mentorship and customer services provision of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State?

Research Hypotheses

The research work is carried out based on the following null hypotheses:

H_{O1}: Apprentice mentorship does not have a significant relationship with value creation of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State

H_{O2}: Apprentice mentorship does not have a significant relationship with customer services provision of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State

Review of Related Literature

Indigenous Entrepreneurial Orientation (IEO)

The literature on IEO underscores the need to move beyond the dominant Western models of entrepreneurship and to recognise the diversity of entrepreneurial practices and orientations that exist within indigenous communities (Risker & Herrera, 2021). The concept of indigenous entrepreneurial orientation (IEO) refers to the unique entrepreneurial mindset, behaviours, and practices that are shaped by the cultural, social, and historical context of indigenous communities (Peredo & McLean, 2018). They went further to state that this community-oriented approach to entrepreneurship is in contrast to the more individualistic and profit-driven models of entrepreneurship that are prevalent in Western contexts.

Similarly, indigenous entrepreneurial orientation is the distinct practices, approaches, mentality, behaviours, and abilities exhibited by domestic entrepreneurs formed through contact with local environmental factors which influence the success and extent to which the organisation grows (Mrabure, Ruwhiu, and Gray, 2018). These studies suggest that understanding the unique cultural and social factors that influence entrepreneurial orientation can be crucial for designing effective policies and support mechanisms to foster sustainable and inclusive economic development in indigenous communities.

Apprentice Mentorship

The benefits of apprentice mentorship have been well-documented in the literature. Apprentices who receive effective mentorship have been shown to demonstrate higher levels of skill proficiency, job satisfaction, and career advancement compared to their non-mentored counterparts (Eby et al., 2013). Apprenticeship refers to the strategy employed to connect individuals to career pathways with an employer/entrepreneur hinged on a work-based learning pattern combining on-the-job training instructions from a mentor such that both parties eexperience mutual benefit (Pritzker, 2023). On the other hand, mentorship is the act of guiding, sharing, and imparting personal values of one seen as a role model/more knowledgeable and successful in an area to those seeking to receive such guidance (Ford, 2017).

The literature on apprentice mentorship underscores the critical role that experienced workers can play in guiding and supporting the professional development of novice workers. By fostering strong mentor-apprentice relationships and providing comprehensive support, organisations can unlock the full potential of their apprenticeship programs and create a pipeline of skilled and motivated employees.

Conceptualising Economic Competitiveness

Competitiveness is the sustainable position of a company to proactively perceive market trends ahead of competitors cum adjust supply according to anticipation to meet the forces of rivalry in a given sector and hence overcome rivals in long-term profitability (Dresch, Collato & Lacerda, 2018). Again, IGI Global (2023) described competitiveness as the ability of an organisation to produce cum offer quality goods and services at the same or lower prices (from the competition) while maximising the return on investment of resources utilised to carve a niche for superior economic performance. Indeed (2023) saw it as the ability to balance the price of products and services with quality to provide optimal value to customers and generate more sales than others.

Furthermore, in the opinions of Indeed (2023) and Ingram (2023), it is not only about carving a niche and staying ahead of others; they recognise the importance of maintaining and staying on the edge created. Hence, these five components were highlighted by them.

i. Creating a value proposition – this can be achieved by making a list of the organisation's areas of competence or competitive edge to be used as the foundational rock or selling points of the business
ii. Commitment to continuous/better ways to reach out to or engage with customers such that their value base keeps drawing them back
iii. Striving to know about and acquire new technologies meant to aid in the generation of quick results in a cost-effective way
iv. Reviewing and restructuring the internal workings of the for better communication and growth through additional staffing and energy injection where needed.
v. Improving new intake training and orientation for distinct company culture and values that will enhance image and goodwill.

Micro-Businesses

Studies have found that micro-enterprises account for a significant share of employment and contribute to the diversification of the economy, particularly in the informal sector (Isaga, 2018). Micro-businesses,defined as enterprises with 10 or fewer employees, play a crucial role in the economic landscape of Nigeria. Similarly, Akinboade (2015) defines micro-businesses as "enterprises with 10 or fewer employees" in the context of their study on the determinants of SME growth and performance in Cameroon and Nigeria. Similarly, Edoho (2016) employs the same definition of micro-businesses in their analysis of the entrepreneurship paradigm in the new millennium and its implications for public policy in Nigeria. Edoho went further to highlight that these small-scale ventures have gained significant attention from both researchers and policymakers due to their potential for job creation, economic diversification, and poverty alleviation. The role of government support

and policy interventions in fostering the development of micro-businesses has also been a recurring theme in the literature.

Value creation (VC)

Value creation (VC) is a quest to discover customer convenience as well as enjoyable experience drivers; turning those desirables into sought-after value and striving to consciously/strategically make them availablesuch that expectations are exceeded (Boyles, 2022; Pahwa, 2023, & Wells 2023). Pahwa (2023) observed that it is what a business offers to stakeholders to sustain its continuous existence as well as the total of the benefits customers get in exchange for prices paid for products in monetary terms and the degree of satisfaction derived from consuming a product. Further, Pahwa (2023) and Wells (2023) posit that VC becomes a possibility if the gaps between organisational purpose, business model, resources/process utilisation, and cost, prices cum willingness to sell and pay are closed as well as synchronised. This achievement they maintain, will lead to secured customer patronage, delight, satisfaction cum loyalty; securing the firm's margin, employee satisfaction, and suppliers surplus.

Customer service (CS)

Rodgers and Mckinney (2023) adduce that customer service (CS) is assistance/support rendered to clients by a representative or agent of a business organisation based on unclarity or issue(s) with any of the organisation's products and services. The importance of CS is that it either comes before or after dealings with the organisation while aiding the client's satisfactory, easy, and enjoyable experience with the organisation. Customer Service to Ghalayini (2019) aims at creating and enhancing the values offered to customers thereby leading to their continued patronage, loyalty, retention, and recommendation. To remain competitively relevant and at the peak of competitive leadership, it is imperative to

periodically advance and commercialize (streamline products efficiently and revitalise the industry life cycle) new products into the market ahead of other players (Li, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the resource-based theory of the firm developed by Barney J. B. in 1991 because indigenous entrepreneurial (IEO) is one of the intangible resources at the disposal of an entrepreneur, which can be utilised in the bid to push an enterprise to success. As reviewed by Dontigney (2018), it is through the use of the various resources (capital, human, social, information as well as thoughts) at the disposal of the entrepreneur that desired results are achieved. Most times (at inception and other critical periods of market crunch and innovativeness) it is the intangible aspects like orientation that comein handy to provide the distinct edge needed to maintain competitive lead.

Empirical Review

Li (2012) worked on the influence ofEntrepreneurial (EO) on technology commercialization: the moderating roles of technological turbulence and integration. From empirical evidence, it was observed that technological turbulence and technology integration moderate the influence of EO on technology commercialization. The author opined that EO is a mediator between learning capability (apprenticeship cum mentorship), entrepreneurial resources, and technology commercialization.

Al-Swidi and Al-Hosam (2012) studied the effect of EO on the al performance of Islamic banks in Yemen using the partial least squares approach and adopted EO to include innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. They agreed that entrepreneurial companiesoverweigh their rivals in exploring and exploiting business opportunities and creatinga competitive advantage towards a better strategic position in the marketplace than others. However, they opined that many growing challenges in the global business environment may cause organisations to adopt indigenous entrepreneurial strategies (which include apprenticeship as well as mentorship programmes) to keep pace with the

speedy changes and rapid challenges.This study used a survey method for 362 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) across Kano, Kaduna, and Sokoto States on the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, learning orientation (through apprenticeship cum mentorship), technology orientation, and SMEs performance in Nigeria.

Through the Partial Least Squared-Structural Equation Method (PLS-SEM), Aminu and Shariff (2014) found that EO though positively significant to SME performance may not serve well in the long run if not combined with learning additional attributes from the environment in developing countries like Nigeria.

Arisi-Nwugballa, Elom, and Onyeizugbe (2016) employed a survey method in conducting their study on evaluating the relevance of entrepreneurial orientation to the performance of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Results showed that innovativeness and proactiveness were significant to customer performance; competitive aggressiveness was significant to both product and customer performance while risk-taking and autonomy had no significant correlation with any of the performance measures used. Hence, the study deduced that these five dimensions of EO had no universal relevance thereby supporting the contextualization of the EOs, of which apprenticeship and mentorship are among.

Irikefe and Bagobiri (2022) studied the effect of entrepreneurial orientation on the performance of small enterprises in Abuja, Nigeria using 349 small enterprises via survey research. Analyses of data through descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis yielded that EO components proved significant at 16.910>2.399 when studied wholly but autonomy was not significant while innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking were significant.

Ulo and Sunday-Nwosu (2022) studied entrepreneurial orientation and performance of auto spare parts and machinery dealers association in Lagos State Nigeria; employed a descriptive survey design on 260 business owners of spare parts/machinery. They found

resilience and competitive aggressiveness components of IEO to be positively significant to the performance of the Auto Spare Parts/machinery businesses studied at r=0.649, p<0.001 and r=0.533,p<0.001 respectively.

Daniel and Chukwuemeka (2023) studied the entrepreneurial orientation and performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria of 352 entrepreneurs across Lagos, Kano, Aba, and Abuja. They used field survey with factor, regression, and structural equation model (SEM) analytical methods to find that only innovation, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness are positively significant to the performance of SMEs in Nigeria at 0.168, 0.120, and 0.132 respectively. They opined that a holistic application of EO constructs assuming that all are beneficial to the Nigerian context may be misleading to business people and suggested targeted focus on those relevant in conjunction with indigenous factors as apprenticeship, mentorship, and the like. Most works reviewed aligned that not all EO dimensions aid the performance of micro-businesses in climes other than their origins (Nigeria inclusive) due to some extant contextual IEO dynamics of which apprenticeship and mentorship are inclusive.

Summary of Literature Review and Gaps in Knowledge

As garnered, IEOs reviewed show they are ingredients needed for business survival, growth, and favourable competition in contextual environments. Most empirical works were carried out in Western environments (indicating a geographic gap) with few in Nigeria but the focus was mostly on EOs and performance; some of the constructs of which were found not to be significant contextually (Arisi-Nwugballa, Elom, & Onyizugbe, 2016). Given the dearth of literature on IEOs versus competitiveness and the gaps perceived birthed in this study; studies covering other areas are also needful.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design to determine the opinions of respondents on the relationship between IEOs and the economic competitiveness of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State.

The research work was conducted withforty-eight entrepreneurs (who had been in operation/survived more than one governmental administration with peculiar business and environmental policies) drawn from across the three Senatorial Zones of Ebonyi State using a Judgemental (Purposive) sampling technique. They were chosen to suit the work, density, and presence of the diverse categories of micro-businesses; time constraints also played a deciding role. Included were two fashion designers, mini supermarkets, barbers, and restaurateurs from two locations in each of the zones. The locations are Abakaliki/Ezzamgbo in Ebonyi North; Ikwo/Onueke in Ebonyi Central andAfikpo/Okposi in Ebonyi South Senatorial zones.

Data were sourced primarily from respondents through structured response questionnaire instruments enabling precise answers. A total of eleven scale items were used; the first three sought to evaluate apprenticeship/mentorship variables while the remaining eight (four each) were for value creation and customer service constructs of economic competitiveness.Face and content validity were used to authenticate the questionnaire by evaluation for necessary corrections before distribution to ensure the instrument measured the purpose. Twenty-five percent of the research instruments retrieved were randomly selected and used to test the reliability of the result via Cronbach's Alpha (α).The result shows a reliability ratio of 0.9 which according to McMillan and Schumacher (1997) confirmed that it is above the acceptable level of 0.5, thereby deemed reliable.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analysed using frequency tables, percentages, standard deviation, and mean using the weights attached to the modified five points Likert scale thus–Strongly agree (5), Agree (4), Undecided (3), Disagree (2) and Strongly disagree (1). Pearson Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses at 0.01 significant levels. A decision point of 3.0 (mean weight after analysis) was chosen, hence where it is equal to or greater than, it was accepted as positive; otherwise, negative. Also, Pearson Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses at 0.01 significant levels, hence any result greater than that will be accepted and the alternate rejected.

Research Instrument Distribution and Analyses

A total of forty-eight copies of the questionnaire were administered to the selected micro business owners across the three Senatorial Zones in Ebonyi State. Forty-five were retrieved and three were not due to unavailability of the respondents at the time of collection.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
AM	11.49	3.429	45
VC	15.20	5.066	45
CS	16.53	3.603	45

The mean results of the research variables at 11.49, 15.20, and 16.53 as depicted in Table 1 for AM, VC, and CS respectively were positively affirmed by the respondents.

Table 2: Correlative Results of Hypotheses 1&2

		AM	VC	CS
AM	**Pearson Correlation**	1	.956**	953**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	45	45	45
VC	**Pearson Correlation**	.956**		.929**
	Sig(2-tailed)	.000		.00
	N	45	45	45
CS	**Pearson Correlation**	953**	.929**	1
	Sig(2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	45	45	45

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

Table 2 shows that apprentice mentorship was positively significant with value creation at 0.956 and customer services at 0.953; thereby both null hypotheses were rejected and the alternates were accepted.

Discussion of Findings

The mean results of the research variables in Table 1 for AM, VC, and CS respectively were positively affirmed by the respondents. Pearson's Moment Correlation revealed that a strong significant relationship exists between apprentice mentorship dimensions of IEO and value creation/customer services components of economic competitiveness in Ebonyi State. This means that contextual environmental dictates need not be overlooked by indigenous entrepreneurs to enable the discovery of distinct avenues to manoeuvre existing markets, competencies as well as unique capabilities that can generate the desired economic competitiveness for business growth and success. As EO dimensions were found to have no universal positive effect on the success of businesses; contextualisation is needed if pace with global speed/changes must be attained and competitive advantage cum

business success attained. The findings corroborate the works conducted by Al-Swidi and Al-Hosam, 2012; Aminu and MohdShariff, 2014; Arisi-Nwugballa, Elom and Onyeizugbe, 2016; Ulo and Sunday-Nwosu, 2022 and Daniel and Chukwuemeka, 2023.

Summary of Findings

i) Results showed that apprentice mentorship hasa significant relationship with value creation in creating economic competitiveness and survival of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State at 0.956.

ii) Findings also revealed that there is a significant relationship between apprentice mentorship and customer services of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State at 0.953.

Conclusion

Based on the findings obtained in this research work, it was concluded that there exists a relationship between indigenous entrepreneurial orientation and the economic competitiveness of micro-businesses in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Therefore,trying to replicate the successes of global markets using Eurocentric EOs might not be feasible as contextual nuances affect businesses vis a viz their sustainability, growth, and success, hence the adoption of IEOs.

Recommendations

i). In as much as EO has its usefulness in businesses and for entrepreneurs, attention should also be focused on contextual peculiarities in application; hence entrepreneurs are to be sensitive to their environments of operation to enable them to practice needful and appropriate ideologies to survive and remain economically competitive.

ii). Furthermore, Nigerian indigenous entrepreneurs need to adopt, develop and practice contextualised ideologies, especially apprentice mentorship as they were found to enhance

business competitiveness as well as sustainability. These attributes can be utilised alongside already existing orientations found useful.

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