

Examining the Influence of Strategic Orientation on the Performance of Small and Medium Enterprises in Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), Market Orientation (MO), and Learning Orientation (LO) on SME performance in Northern Nigeria, with a focus on the mediating role of innovation capability and the moderating effect of government institutional support. Despite SMEs' vital contribution to Nigeria's economy, the interaction between internal capabilities and external support remains underexplored, particularly in the region's unique socioeconomic and cultural context. Anchored in the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Institutional Theory, the study offers insights into enhancing SME resilience and competitiveness in resource-constrained environments. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed, collecting data online from 406 SMEs using stratified sampling. PLS-SEM 4 was used for data analysis. Findings confirm that EO, MO, and LO significantly influence SME performance, with innovation capability acting as a mediator. Government institutional support moderates the EO-performance relationship but does not affect MO and LO relationships. The study emphasizes the importance of maintaining strategic orientations to improve SME outcomes. This study provides a novel examination of SME performance in Northern Nigeria by integrating RBV and Institutional Theory, this research contributes to SME literature by examining the interaction between internal strategies and external enablers. It underscores the role of government support in fostering entrepreneurial success and provides policymakers with actionable recommendations to enhance SME competitiveness. By bridging theoretical and practical perspectives, the study presents a comprehensive framework for understanding SME growth in resource-constrained settings.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurial Orientation, Market Orientation, Learning Orientation, Innovation Capability and Firm Performance.*

1.0 Introduction

The contemporary business landscape is marked by rapid and relentless change, driven by globalization, the erosion of market boundaries, intense competition, shortened product life cycles, and rapid technological advancements. In response to these dynamic shifts, firms are compelled to recalibrate their priorities, emphasizing customer orientation over a profit-centric mindset, reflecting the evolving standards of the market. This shifting external milieu, compounded by escalating customer expectations, underscores the imperative for organizations to significantly fortify their internal capacities. This necessity is particularly pronounced in emerging markets such as Nigeria. Despite the importance of SMEs for employment generation and economic contribution to GDP, the case in Nigeria is not the same as the high failure rate of SMEs in the country is alarming, with approximately 80 to 85 per cent of these businesses collapsing within their first five years of establishment (Yahaya et al., 2025). This alarming statistic underscores the vulnerability of SMEs during the critical early stages of their lifecycle, where they face significant challenges such as financial instability, market fluctuations, and operational difficulties. Moreover, even among those that surpass the five-year threshold, an additional 10 to 15 per cent fail before reaching their tenth year of operation (Gwadabe, 2017; Ma'aji, 2019).

Furthermore, Nigerian SMEs' underperformance and high failure rates are primarily attributed to deficiencies in entrepreneurial learning, IT proficiency, and marketing skills. Nevertheless, Government institutional support has been limited in the context making the survival and competitiveness of SMEs difficult. These gaps impede their ability to manage finances effectively, adopt and leverage new technologies, and execute successful marketing strategies. Addressing these issues through targeted Government institutional support is crucial for enhancing SME resilience, improving competitiveness, and increasing their overall

economic contribution (Abdullahi et al., 2023, 2024). Moreover, cultivating robust organisational capabilities in such contexts becomes paramount to effectively navigating the complex and competitive business environment (Muna et al., 2022). The resource-based view underscores the strategic importance of harnessing internal organisational dynamics to secure a competitive edge and achieve enhanced returns (Yahaya & Nadarajah, 2023). Among these internal dynamics, innovation capability emerges as a linchpin for sustained competitiveness amidst the cutthroat competition prevalent in today's business milieu.

Therefore, Nigerian SMEs need to integrate strategic orientation and innovation capability into their business practices to tackle these challenges and reduce the high failure rates. Strategic orientation offers a framework for effective planning, resource allocation, and risk management (Syahdan et al., 2020). At the same time, Government institutional support and innovation capability provides the tools for gaining a competitive edge, improving operational efficiency, expanding market reach, and boosting customer satisfaction. By synergistically combining strategic and innovative approaches Government support, Nigerian SMEs can significantly improve their performance, achieve sustainable growth, and substantially contribute to national economic development. This study seeks those concerns by integrating the strategic orientation of entrepreneurial, market, and learning orientation to the firm performance domain mediated by innovation capability and moderated by Government institutional support to assess their impact from the resource base perspective in Nigeria.

2.0 Literature review and Hypothesis development

2.1 Underpinning theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, originating from Penrose's 1959 work,

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conceptualizes a firm as a collection of resources utilized for economic benefits. Barney (1991) expanded this theory by defining a firm's resources as capabilities, assets (both tangible and intangible), techniques, attributes, and orientations that create sustainable competitive advantages. Daft (2009) and Peteraf (1993) further support this perspective, highlighting the strategic application of resources for maintaining a competitive edge. Barney et al. (2011) and Thornhill and Amit (2003) emphasize the role of organizational resources in performance and sustainability. Madhani (2010) illustrates the practical application of the RBV, particularly the importance of financial resources in acquiring additional assets. The RBV posits that firms gain a competitive advantage when their resources are variable and complex for competitors to replicate or substitute (Peteraf, 1993). Resources are categorized into physical, human, and organizational techniques (Godfrey & Hill, 1995), with further distinctions by Balgobin (2003).

RBV research often focuses on intangible resources like information technology and dynamic capabilities, which guide strategies and interactions within firms (Barney, 1991). Strategic orientations, particularly Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), Market Orientation (MO), and Learning Orientation (LO) are identified as valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources that enhance SMEs' performance and competitiveness (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Narver & Slater, 1990). Whether owned or acquired, effective resource management is crucial for sustaining a competitive edge (Hoskisson et al., 2015). Implementing the RBV aids in understanding how financial and non-financial resources contribute to SMEs' development and financial sustainability (Jeong & Chung, 2022).

Institutional theory posits that institutional frameworks, comprising political, economic, and legal rules, significantly influence business operations (North, 1990; Scott, 1995; Davis et al., 1971). Both formal and informal institutions impact

firms' strategies and success (Peng et al., 2009; Suchman, 1995). In transitional economies, Government Institutional Support (GIS) plays a vital role in providing access to finance, fostering a supportive policy environment, and offering resources (Filatotchev et al., 2018; Ngo et al., 2016). However, institutional voids in these economies create challenges, necessitating government intervention (Mair & Marti, 2009; Sheng et al., 2018). Aligning firm strategies with GIS expectations is crucial for success (Sheng et al., 2011; Shu et al., 2016). Despite GIS's importance, research on its moderating role in the context of Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), Market Orientation (MO), and Learning Orientation (LO) is limited (Otache & Usang, 2022). This study addresses this knowledge gap by investigating GIS's moderating role in Northern Nigeria, examining its relationship with innovation capability and strategic orientations, and providing insights into institutional dynamics and firm performance.

2.2 Entrepreneurial Orientation and firm performance

Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) embodies a spectrum of processes and activities driving firms to act autonomously, innovate, embrace risk, and seize market opportunities (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Šlogar et al., 2023; Syahdan et al., 2020). EO empowers enterprises to explore novel market prospects and enhance operations (Nakku et al., 2019). Additionally, EO entails strategic decision-making processes that empower firms to make innovative, proactive, and risk-taking decisions and actions (Issau et al., 2022). Innovativeness reflects EO's inclination towards embracing new ideas, experimentation, and creative processes, potentially leading to novel products, services, or technological advancements (Chege et al., 2020). Proactiveness denotes the entrepreneurial capacity to anticipate customer demands and initiate new business ventures (Meekaewkunchorn et al., 2021). While entrepreneurs' perceptions of risk's impact on

performance vary, managing risk is integral to business management (Jalali, 2023). Firms exhibiting high EO demonstrate agility in shaping industrial configurations and adapting to market conditions to their advantage, focusing on bold and adventurous actions. However, EO requires significant resources, and its performance implications may suffer without adequate support (Ferrerias-Méndez et al., 2022; Rubin & Callaghan, 2019). Therefore, EO success often necessitates additional resources, possibly sourced from external networks.

An entrepreneurial firm embraces experimentation with new products and technologies, proactively seeks competitive advantages, and embraces risk. Consequently, EO encompasses dimensions such as innovation, proactiveness, and risk-taking (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Lyon et al., 2000). Entrepreneurially oriented firms exhibit high levels of proactivity in seizing market opportunities and assume significant risks. At the same time, their adaptability allows them to thrive in dynamic competitive environments, shaping and leveraging uncertain opportunities (Covin & Wales, 2012). Extensive research indicates a significant relationship between EO and firm performance (Ferrerias-Méndez et al., 2022; Issau et al., 2022), particularly evident in studies focusing on SMEs. Given the consistent findings across prior studies, this research adopts a traditional approach, treating EO as a significant determinant of firm performance. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1. EO has a positive relationship with firm performance.

2.3 Market Orientation and Firm Performance

Market-oriented organizational culture is vital for generating superior customer value as it underscores the firm's continuous pursuit of opportunities to enhance customer value (Jaworski & Kohli, 1996; Slater & Narver, 1995). The dimensions of customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination play critical roles in

fostering superior customer value, which in turn impacts business performance, measured by financial outcomes like profitability relative to competitors (Ozkaya et al., 2015; Schulze et al., 2022). Customer orientation entails shared beliefs prioritizing customer interests and necessitates a deep understanding of evolving customer needs (Baker et al., 2022; Powers et al., 2020). It also entails constant analysis of the competitive landscape and understanding the strengths, weaknesses, strategies, and roles of different actors in the marketplace (Slater & Narver, 1995). Additionally, it requires inter-functional coordination, emphasizing the importance of concerted effort and commitment to creating superior customer value (Kanovska & Tomaskova, 2012).

While most studies adopt an aggregate-level conceptualization of MO, recent empirical findings suggest that individual components may yield different performance outcomes (Hooley et al., 2000). Although many empirical studies demonstrate a significant relationship between MO and business performance, the evidence is inconsistent, with some studies reporting non-significant or no relationships (Hamzah et al., 2020; Mansur & Djaelani, 2023). The inconclusive empirical findings suggest that the relationship between MO and business performance may be moderated by both internal and external factors, such as the type of offerings and environmental turbulence (Anning-Dorson, 2021; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Li & Atuahene-Gima, 2001). However, more literature needs to test this relationship in developing economics (Yahaya & Nadarajah, 2023).

H2. MO has a positive relationship with firm performance.

2.4 Learning orientation and firm performance

Learning orientation, considered a cornerstone of competitive advantage and a predictor of future organizational success, has garnered attention across

various disciplines such as psychology, management, sociology, organizational theory, marketing, and strategic management. Scholars have proposed diverse conceptualizations of learning orientation, with some focusing on concrete information generation and dissemination systems (Peng et al., 2022; van Breda, 2018). In contrast, others highlight the importance of fostering a shared mental model and organizational vision. By amalgamating these approaches, learning orientation can promote organizational values that shape the firm's propensity to utilize and generate knowledge (Ahmed et al., 2018; Kantabutra, 2010). Literature has found that organizations emphasizing learning outperform competitors, especially in challenging business environments (Yahaya & Nadarajah, 2023). Cultivating a learning culture is vital for gaining and maintaining a competitive edge. Empirical evidence supports the link between learning orientation and business performance (Baker et al., 2022). Learning-oriented firms prioritize customer needs, leading to improved outcomes such as higher new product success and customer retention (Allammari et al., 2024; Peng et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2018). The learning/experience curve theory further suggests that learning reduces production costs, enhancing performance. Considering this research, leadership style is proposed to influence firm performance through its impact on learning orientation, prompting further investigation into this relationship.

H3. LO has a positive relationship with firm performance.

2.5 Mediating role of innovation capability.

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) enhances firms' global competitiveness by fostering innovation, creating market opportunities, and embracing risks, positioning firms as industry leaders (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Akomea et al., 2023; Miller, 1983). This strategic approach enables firms to develop advanced capabilities and technical expertise,

meeting evolving consumer demands (Ismail & Mohamad, 2022; Shu et al., 2019). Empirical studies affirm EO's impact on firm performance, leveraging intangible assets for competitive advantage (Baker & Sinkula, 2009; Susanto et al., 2023; Sulistyio & Ayuni, 2020). Market-oriented firms excel by understanding customer needs and competitors, utilizing innovation capabilities to enhance customer value and improve performance (Tolstoy et al., 2022). Without these capabilities, firms struggle to exploit market knowledge effectively (Nofiani et al., 2021). Innovation strategically drives tangible benefits, boosting financial performance and competitive advantage (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021). Learning orientation complements EO and market orientation by promoting adaptability and continuous improvement. Firms refine practices through iterative processes, reflection, and feedback, enhancing absorptive capacity and accelerating innovation (Baba, 2015; Khan et al., 2020; Zikmund et al., 2013; Schacher, 2018; Weerawardena & Mavondo, 2011). These orientations, combined with innovation capability, are critical for driving organizational innovation and performance, forming the basis for the proposed hypothesis.

H4. Innovation capability mediates the relationship between EO and Firm performance.

H5. Innovation capability mediates the relationship between MO and Firm performance.

H6. Innovation capability mediates the relationship between LO and Firm performance.

2.6 Moderating role of Government institutional support (GIS)

Government institutional support, encompassing access to finances, infrastructure, and business-friendly policies (Li & Atuahene-Gima, 2001), plays a vital moderating role in SME performance. It fosters business growth through initiatives such as tax incentives, loans, and diagnostic services (Chelliah & Huoy Lee, 2020; Wang et al., 2021) and strengthens entrepreneurial ecosystems when paired

with educational institutions (Khan & Shah, 2020). While prior research has examined its role in various sectors, including banking, hospitality, and green supply chains (Giao et al., 2020; Salem et al., 2021; Ilyas et al., 2020), limited attention has been given to its moderating effect on the relationship between strategic orientations entrepreneurial (EO), market (MO), and learning (LO) and SME performance, particularly in transitional economies like Nigeria (Moreira et al., 2022). This study addresses these gaps by proposing government institutional support as a moderating variable in the relationship between strategic orientations, innovation capability, and SME performance. Thus it is hypothesizes that:

H7. GIS moderate the relationship between EO and Firm performance.

H8. GIS moderates the relationship between MO and Firm performance.

H9. GIS moderates the relationship between LO and Firm performance.

3.0 Materials and Methods Participants and procedures

The study focused on SMEs in northeastern Nigeria in Bauchi, Gombe, and Yobe states, all with over five years of business tenure. Moreover, to address common method bias, a cover letter assured respondents of their participation's voluntary and anonymous nature (Gabriel et al., 2019; Podsakoff et al., 2012). Incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analysis. The required sample size, determined using G*power, was 384 participants. However, to mitigate non-response bias, the sample size was increased by 40% based on Salkind (2012) recommendation, resulting in the distribution of 536 questionnaires through purposive sampling. Of these, 406 questionnaires were valid for final analysis, with the sample comprising 64.6% male and 35.4% female participants. The average respondent age was 30, and 51% had graduate or postgraduate qualifications.

3.1 Measures

The current study strategically designed its measurements by drawing on established research within the domain (Churchill, 1979). The multidimensional framework crafted for this study encompasses six variables: Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) encompassing innovativeness, proactiveness and risk-taking with 16 items adopted from (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Covin & Wales, 2012), Market Orientation (MO) comprising three key components customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination activities with 15 items adopted from (Jaworski and Kohli, 1996; Suliyanto & Rahab, 2012), Learning Orientation (LO), characterised by a shared vision among members, a commitment to continuous learning, and a receptive, open-minded approach to new ideas and information with 12 items adopted from (Sinkula et al., 1997; Özahin et al., 2011) innovation capability, with 09 items adopted from (Vicente et al., 2015) Government Institutional Support constitute 03 items adopted from (Li & Atuahene-Gima, 2001), and SME performance with 06 items adopted from (González-Benito et al., 2009). Each item in the study was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with respondents instructed to rate their responses, aligning with established practices in this field (Dawes, 2008)

3.2 Result

Before evaluating the model, preliminary tests ensured adherence to multivariate assumptions. Mahalanobis Distance (D2) was used to assess outliers, confirming none were present. Given the single-source data origin, three statistical measures addressed common method variance (CMV). Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003, 2012), showed the first factor accounted for only 39.11% of the total variance. The Lindell and Whitney (2001) approach used three items from the social desirability scale (Xiao et al., 2017) as marker variables, revealing low correlation with other model variables. A comprehensive collinearity assessment

(Full Collinearity) using Warp-PLS software (Kock et al., 2021; Kock, 2015) indicated the highest variance inflation factor (VIF) was 3.46, below the threshold of 5 (Pallant, 2020), alleviating CMV concerns. However, to verify data normality, Mardia's tests for multivariate skewness and kurtosis were conducted (Hair et al., 2017). The results revealed significant non-normal skewness ($\beta = 10.417, p < 0.000$) and kurtosis ($\beta = 58.021, p < 0.000$). Consequently, non-parametric software, specifically Smart-PLS, was employed to analyze the non-normal data.

3.2.1 Models' assessment

This study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to investigate the outer and inner models. PLS-SEM was chosen due to its suitability for the current study, as it imposes fewer restrictions on multivariate normality assumptions and is well-suited for exploratory models and theory development. Smart-PLS software was selected for model estimations because it provides comprehensive model assessment indices compared to other software options such as Warp-PLS. Utilizing the two-step approach the measurement (outer) and structural (inner) models were assessed using PLS-SEM through Smart-PLS 4.

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and inner models. PLS-SEM was selected for its suitability to the current study's context, as it imposes fewer restrictions on multivariate normality assumptions and is particularly apt for exploratory models and theory development (Hair & Alamer, 2022; Jalali, 2023; Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016). Smart-PLS software was chosen for model estimations because it offers more comprehensive model assessment indices than alternatives such as Warp-PLS (Hair & Alamer, 2022). Following a two-step approach (Hair et al., 2010), the measurement (outer) and structural (inner) models were evaluated using PLS-SEM through Smart-PLS 4.

3.2.2 Measurement model assessment

This study evaluates the validity and reliability of the reflective items' outer model, following the guidelines of (Dash & Paul, 2021). The assessment involves examining indicator loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) values to gauge convergent validity and ensure that the items accurately represent the construct under investigation. All parameters exceed the recommended threshold of 0.6, as suggested by Hair et al. (2010). Specifically, the composite reliability (CR) values surpass 0.7, the average variance extracted (AVE) values exceed 0.5, and the communalities (CA) also surpass 0.7. Consequently, the study successfully achieves convergent validity (see Table I for details).

Table I Convergent Validity

Variables	Items	Loadings	CA	CR-Rho		AVE
				A	CR-Rho C	
EO	INN1	0.805	0.886	0.893	0.921	0.746
	INN2	0.896				
	INN3	0.905				
	INN4	0.845				
	PRO1	0.823				
PRO	PRO2	0.625	0.777	0.797	0.849	0.534
	PRO3	0.766				
	PRO4	0.604				
	PRO5	0.806				

	RTS1	0.814	0.912	0.914	0.933	0.696
	RTS2	0.834				
	RTS3	0.866				
	RTS4	0.885				
	RTS5	0.822				
	RTS6	0.781				
MO	CUS1	0.872	0.903	0.910	0.932	0.774
	CUS2	0.874				
	CUS3	0.893				
	CUS4	0.880				
	COP1	0.911	0.837	0.876	0.897	0.695
	COP2	0.529				
	COP3	0.935				
	COP4	0.891				
	IFC1	0.866	0.852	0.949	0.882	0.601
	IFC2	0.866				
	IFC3	0.699				
	IFC4	0.737				
	IFC5	0.688				
LO	COL1	0.719	0.894	0.900	0.923	0.706
	COL2	0.878				
	COL3	0.918				
	COL4	0.885				
	COL5	0.785				
	SHV1	0.743	0.821	0.823	0.882	0.652
	SHV2	0.861				
	SHV3	0.804				
	SHV4	0.818				
	OPM1	0.868	0.835	0.837	0.901	0.752
	OPM2	0.851				
	OPM3	0.882				
SMP	SMP1	0.797	0.842	0.846	0.884	0.561
	SMP2	0.743				
	SMP3	0.806				
	SMP4	0.737				
	SMP5	0.764				
	SMP6	0.633				
INC	INC1	0.787	0.855	0.859	0.889	0.504
	INC2	0.611				
	INC3	0.786				
	INC5	0.746				
	INC6	0.550				

	INC7	0.814				
	INC8	0.620				
	INC9	0.719				
GIS	GIS1	0.856	0.825	0.826	0.896	0.741
	GIS2	0.842				
	GIS3	0.884				

3.2.3 Structural Model Assessment

The structural model elucidates the dependent relationships among the constructs within the hypothetical framework (Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2021). This model plays a crucial role in illustrating the interrelationships among constructs and aims to validate the theoretical framework by clarifying the connections between endogenous and exogenous latent variables. In this study, the inner model includes entrepreneurial orientation (EO), market orientation (MO), and learning orientation (LO) as exogenous variables, with innovation capability and firm performance as endogenous variables.

distinctiveness of each construct compared to others within the model. The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was employed to confirm discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2009). (Henseler et al., 2009). As indicated in Table II, the HTMT values did not exceed the thresholds of 0.90 (Kline, 2013) and 0.85 (Gold et al., 2001), thus confirming the discriminant validity of the constructs. Additionally, the upper limit confidence intervals were all below 1, indicating that discriminant validity was achieved. Importantly, all conditions for validity and reliability were successfully met, providing a strong foundation for our study. Consequently, the study proceeded to assess the inner model (Henseler et al., 2015) (see Table II for details).

Following the assessment of convergent validity, discriminant validity was evaluated to ensure the

Table II Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	COL	COP	CUS	GIS	IFC	INC	INN	OPM	PRO	RTS	SHV	SMP
COL												
COP	0.047											
CUS	0.496	0.117										
GIS	0.066	0.580	0.120									
IFC	0.800	0.061	0.375	0.078								
INC	0.070	0.753	0.106	0.702	0.083							
INN	0.432	0.153	0.708	0.183	0.268	0.134						
OPM	0.640	0.080	0.547	0.106	0.594	0.104	0.401					
PRO	0.070	0.721	0.074	0.781	0.127	0.804	0.077	0.105				
RTS	0.351	0.174	0.609	0.201	0.259	0.168	0.837	0.360	0.138			
SHV	0.661	0.082	0.542	0.115	0.726	0.154	0.386	0.838	0.132	0.368		
SMP	0.063	0.761	0.146	0.785	0.076	0.806	0.171	0.124	0.820	0.213	0.141	

To evaluate the inner model, this study employed a bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 resamples to

calculate the beta coefficients and corresponding t-values. Additionally, the coefficient of determination

(R²), predictive relevance (Q²), and effect sizes (f²) were assessed. The R² value accounted for 0.985, indicating a high level of explained variance, while the Q² value was 0.614, demonstrating substantial predictive relevance. The effect sizes (f²) were also examined as per the guidelines of (Hair et al., 2024; Shmueli et al., 2019) were observed. The Q² and R² values obtained in this study. Notably, the research model accounts for 79% and 69% of the total variances in Innovation Capability and SME Performance, respectively. Applying Cohen's criteria (1988), the Q² and R² values of 0.985, 0.614 and 79% and 69%, respectively are considered high, indicative of a model with substantial predictive accuracy.

The study commenced by investigating how Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), Market Orientation (MO), and Learning Orientation (LO) serve as predictors of firm performance. As illustrated in Table III and Figure 1.1, the data revealed a significant relationship between the perseverance of effort and all three strategic orientations regarding their direct impact on firm

performance. Specifically, the analyses demonstrated significant associations for EO ($\beta = 0.341, t = 5.442, p = 0.000$), MO ($\beta = 0.152, t = 1.669, p = 0.048$), and LO ($\beta = 0.263, t = 2.183, p = 0.015$), thus confirming Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Regarding the mediating effects, the results supported Hypotheses 4 ($\beta = 0.051, t = 1.706, p = 0.045$) and 6 ($\beta = 0.211, t = 2.577, p = 0.005$). Hypothesis 5 ($\beta = 0.018, t = 1.708, p = 0.045$). The moderation analysis reveals distinct effects of government institutional support (GIS) on the relationships between strategic orientations and SME performance. GIS significantly moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation (EO) and SME performance, with a small effect size ($\beta = 0.042, t = 1.860, p = 0.032$). However, the moderation effect of GIS on the relationship between market orientation (MO) and SME performance is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.032, t = 1.223, p = 0.111$). Interestingly, GIS does not moderate the relationship between learning orientation (LO) and SME performance, indicating a counterproductive interaction ($\beta = -0.060, t = 2.759, p = 0.003$). For a detailed results of these findings, see Table III.

Table III Results of the Hypotheses Testing

Relationship	Std-Beta	Std-Dev	Confidence intervals		BCILL	BCIUL	Decision
			t-values	p-values			
EO -> SMP	0.341	0.063	5.442	0.000	0.238	0.438	Supported
MO -> SMP	0.152	0.091	1.669	0.048	-0.018	0.295	Supported
LO -> SMP	0.263	0.120	2.183	0.015	0.016	0.425	Supported
EO -> INC -> SMP	0.051	0.030	1.706	0.045	0.014	0.106	Supported
MO -> INC -> SMP	0.018	0.010	1.708	0.045	0.004	0.038	Supported
LO -> INC -> SMP	0.211	0.082	2.577	0.005	0.074	0.338	Supported
GIS x EO -> SMP	0.042	0.023	1.860	0.032	0.003	0.078	Supported
GIS x MO -> SMP	0.032	0.026	1.223	0.111	-0.001	0.085	Not Supported
GIS x LO -> SMP	-0.060	0.022	2.759	0.003	-0.101	-0.031	Not Supported

Note: A 90% confidence interval with a bootstrapping of 10,000 was used.

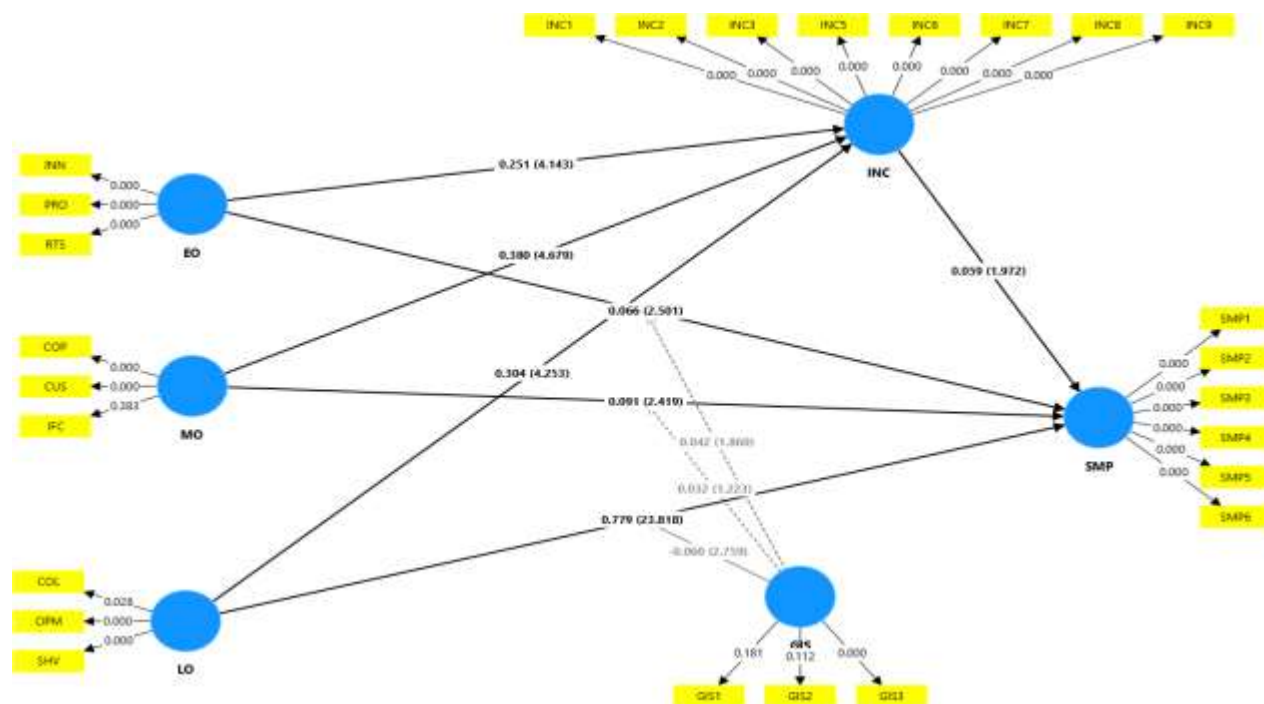


Figure 4.1 Structural model

4.0 Discussion

The investigation into the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation (EO), market orientation (MO), learning orientation (LO), innovation capability (INC), and the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria led to the development of hypotheses (H1-H3). These hypotheses aimed to establish direct relationships between the independent variables (EO, MO, LO, and INC) and the dependent variable (SME performance). Specifically, each hypothesis proposed a significant relationship between EO and SME performance, MO and SME performance, LO and SME performance, and INC and SME performance. The findings support relationships among these latent constructs, consistent with prior studies by (Norsalehe & Idris, 2023; Šlogar et al., 2023; Mathafena & Msimango-Galawe, 2022, 2023; Baker et al., 2022; Elgarhy & Abou-Shouk, 2023; Otache & Usang, 2022; Yahaya & Nadarajah, 2025). These results reinforce the theoretical framework suggesting that entrepreneurial, market, and learning

orientations, along with innovation capability, significantly enhance the performance of SMEs in Nigeria.

The influence of Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), Market Orientation (MO), Learning Orientation (LO), and Innovation Capability (INC) on SME performance is driven by the strategic importance of these orientations. EO fosters innovation, risk-taking, and proactiveness, directing resources toward growth opportunities. MO enables SMEs to adapt to market demands, aligning strategies with customer needs and competitive dynamics. LO encourages continuous learning and organizational adaptability, while INC enhances competitiveness through innovative products, services, and processes. The supportive Nigerian business environment, characterized by technological advancements and strong institutional frameworks, offers SMEs resources and incentives to leverage these orientations and capabilities.

Hypothesis H4, which posits a positive relationship between EO and SME performance through the

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mediating effect of INC, highlights that EO drives innovation within SMEs. This is consistent with prior studies (Sunyoto et al., 2023; Wijaya & Rahmayanti, 2023), emphasizing the role of innovation in encouraging SMEs to invest in research, explore new markets, and experiment with novel ideas, thereby enhancing competitiveness and performance. The mediation between EO, INC, and SME performance underscores the importance of fostering a culture of innovation and creating an environment that supports SMEs' entrepreneurial activities for sustained growth. Hypothesis H5, suggesting a significant relationship between INC and MO, relationship between INC's mediating effect and the MO-SME performance relationship. This finding aligns with previous studies (Huhtala et al., 2014; Maclean et al., 2023; Zehir et al., 2015).

For Hypothesis H6, which posits a significant relationship between INC and LO, the study finds empirical support for INC's mediating role in linking LO and SME performance. These findings align with Yahaya and Nadarajah (2023), reinforcing the importance of the Resource-Based View (RBV), which identifies innovation as a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resource. The significant relationship between LO and INC stems from the effective implementation of LO strategies in Nigerian SMEs, including investing in employee training and promoting knowledge-sharing practices. Such initiatives foster a culture of continuous improvement, enhancing innovation capability and positively impacting performance outcomes.

Hypothesis H7, suggesting that GIS moderates the relationship between EO and SME performance, was supported. The results emphasize the role of government in fostering an enabling environment for SMEs through initiatives such as policy reforms, regulatory frameworks, and financial incentives. These interventions help SMEs leverage their entrepreneurial orientation and translate innovation into tangible outcomes, addressing structural

constraints and market failures. Government support mechanisms mitigate risks, enhance access to funding, and enable SMEs to focus on entrepreneurial activities, ultimately boosting performance. H8, proposing GIS as a moderator between MO and SME performance, was not supported. The findings highlight inefficiencies in government policies, such as inadequate funding, bureaucratic delays, and inconsistent policy execution, which hinder SMEs from effectively capitalizing on their market orientation. Regulatory constraints and a lack of market transparency exacerbate these challenges, limiting SMEs' ability to leverage market insights for competitive advantage. Structural weaknesses within Nigeria's governance system further complicate the implementation of market-oriented strategies, resulting in limited government support for this relationship. Similarly, H9, which posited GIS as a moderator between LO and SME performance, was also not supported. The absence of support may be attributed to the limited effectiveness of government initiatives in fostering a learning-oriented culture among SMEs. Insufficient access to training, inadequate funding for skills development, and regulatory barriers hinder SMEs' ability to adopt learning behaviors. Additionally, systemic issues such as weak governance structures, fragmented policy implementation, and socio-economic challenges prevent SMEs from capitalizing on learning orientation to enhance performance.

The findings support the RBV theory by demonstrating that innovation capability is a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resource, which mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation (EO) and SME performance, thus driving sustainable competitive advantage and superior performance (Sunyoto et al., 2023; Wijaya & Rahmayanti, 2023). This conclusion aligns with prior research. Additionally, contextual factors in Nigeria, such as rapid technological advancements, changing market trends, and supportive institutional frameworks, further enhance

the relationship between learning orientation (LO), innovation capability (INC), and SME performance, providing SMEs with essential resources and incentives to leverage these initiatives effectively (Norsalehe & Idris, 2023; Šlogar et al., 2023). In addition, the findings highlight significant challenges in the application of institutional theory in transitional economies, particularly in Nigeria. The lack of support for GIS as a moderator in these relationships underscores the complex interplay between government interventions, SME strategies, and performance outcomes. Further research is needed to explore the mechanisms that shape these dynamics and to identify more effective policy interventions that address SMEs' specific needs, enhance their learning capabilities, and foster long-term growth.

5.0 Conclusion

The study underscores the significance of strategic orientation in enhancing the innovation capabilities of SMEs across the Northeastern states of Bauchi, Gombe, and Yobe in Nigeria. The findings emphasize that SMEs can effectively innovate in product production when they possess a high level of strategic orientation. Both entrepreneurial orientation market orientation and learning orientation play pivotal roles in fostering innovation capability within organizations, particularly SMEs. However, a notable weakness among SMEs lies in their reluctance to innovate and embrace risks. SMEs must bolster their strategic orientation to rejuvenate established enterprises and bolster competitiveness, especially within Nigeria's developing economy aiming to bolster SME performance for substantial employment generation, reduce SMEs failure rate and enhance Gross Domestic Product growth. The inclination towards embracing and supporting novel ideas, experimentation, and creative processes necessitates a blend of knowledge, technology, skills, and support from relevant stakeholders. In the face of rapidly evolving business landscapes driven by innovations capability and technological

advancements, SMEs must swiftly adapt and forecast changes by generating sustainable innovations aligned with market needs. Agility in responding to market dynamics positions SMEs as first movers, crucial for gaining business performance and competitive advantage. Government support, along with assistance from SMEs, universities, and associations, is essential for providing holistic coaching, training, and mentoring activities, encompassing innovation knowledge, environmental analysis, and decision-making process, while also fortifying the courage to take risks.

6.1 Theoretical implication

This study contributes to the Resource-Based View (RBV) by reinforcing the importance of innovation capability (INC) as a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resource that mediates the relationship between Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) and SME performance. The findings support the notion that EO, Market Orientation (MO), and Learning Orientation (LO), when combined with innovation capabilities, significantly contribute to enhancing SME performance and competitive advantage. Furthermore, the research highlights the relevance of RBV in the Nigerian context, illustrating how SMEs can leverage these strategic orientations to improve performance and sustain competitive advantage.

In addition to RBV, the study integrates Institutional Theory to explain the role of the business environment, particularly government institutional support (GIS), in shaping SME performance. Institutional Theory underscores the influence of formal and informal rules, regulations, and norms that guide organizational behavior. The findings suggest that while GIS plays a role in moderating the relationship between EO and SME performance, its impact on MO and LO was not as evident. This underscores the complex interplay between government interventions, SMEs' strategies, and performance outcomes, especially in transitional

economies like Nigeria. The lack of support for GIS as a moderator highlights the need for more nuanced models that account for the unique challenges faced by SMEs in environments with institutional weaknesses and inconsistent policy execution.

6.2 Practical implication

For policymakers, the findings underline the importance of fostering an environment that supports SMEs through policy reforms, regulatory frameworks, and financial incentives, especially in promoting EO. However, the inefficiencies observed in GIS moderation underscore the need for improvements in government interventions, such as providing better funding, reducing bureaucratic delays, and ensuring consistency in policy execution. For SMEs, the study emphasizes the need to invest in innovation, learning, and market-oriented strategies to stay competitive. SMEs should focus on enhancing their innovation capabilities and fostering a culture of continuous learning to improve performance. Furthermore, the study suggests that government support should be tailored to help SMEs leverage these strategies more effectively.

7.0 Limitations and Suggestions for further studies

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationships between EO, MO, LO, INC, and SME performance, several limitations warrant attention. First, the study is geographically focused on Nigeria, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Future studies could extend this research to other emerging economies to assess the robustness of these relationships in different institutional settings. Second, the lack of support for GIS as a moderator calls for further investigation into the specific mechanisms through which government interventions affect SME performance. Future research could explore the role of more targeted government policies in enhancing the learning and market orientations of SMEs. Finally, longitudinal studies could provide a deeper

understanding of the long-term effects of EO, MO, LO, and INC on SME performance, considering the dynamic nature of the business environment.

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