International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences
October 2012, Vol. 2, No. 10
ISSN: 2222-6990

Export Performance of SMEs in the Nigerian Leather Industry and the Mediating Effect of Perception of Export Difficulty

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Abstract

Even though a large amount of work has been carried out to research the factors that affect export performance, there is a seeming neglect of research about specific industries operating in developing countries like Nigeria. This paper presents a research into the factors that affect export performance of SMEs in the Nigerian leather industry. Based on the resource-based view, we posit that intangible resources (Knowledge, Image and marketing resources) are all positively related to firm export performance. The study also hypothesizes that perception of export difficulty mediates the relationship between intangible resources barriers and export performance. Standard survey questionnaires were used to collect data from SMEs operating in the leather industry in North-Western Nigeria and multiple regression analysis was used for hypotheses testing. Findings from the data analysis provided support for the hypothesized relationships thus suggesting support for the theoretical model of the study.

Keywords: Export performance, export barriers, perception of export difficulty

Introduction

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) make up a significant proportion of businesses within any nation and they play a major role they play in domestic development (Okpara, 2009; Ibeh, 2004; Leonidou, 2004). However, despite the significant increase in international trade as a result of globalization, market liberalization and regional agreements to facilitate trade SMEs are not well represented (Leonidou, 2004; Morgan & Katsikeas, 1997) and this is particular significant in Sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria (Ibeh, 2004). Much research has thus been devoted to understanding the factors that affect exporting activities of SMEs (Karelakis, Mattas & Chryssochoidis, 2008; Julian & Ahmed, 2005; Leonidou, 1995a), but most of this research is in developed countries, which raises serious implications with respect to generalizability (Tesfom & Lutz, 2006; Leonidou, 2004; Katsikeas & Morgan, 1994). The near lack of research in this field with reference to developing countries like Nigeria creates a gap with respect to understanding the full nature of export barriers and their impact on exporting activities in the context of low income countries.

In this study, export barriers refer to all those factors that affect a firm's ability to effectively initiate, develop and sustain exporting operations (Leonidou, 2004; Leonidou, 1995a). In other words export barriers or problems are those limiting factors or obstacles that prevent firms from engaging in the export of goods and services. Such barriers to exporting can be encountered by firms at all stages of the export development process even though the nature or severity may differ depending on whether the firm is in the pre-involvement or mature stages (Leonidou, 2004). On the basis of the resource-based view (RBV), three specific export barriers groups that can be considered as intangible resources (Grant, 1991, Barney, 1991) of the firm, were synthesized from the literature. These three factors or variables are (1) Knowledge Resource Barriers; (2) Image Resource Barriers and Marketing Resource Barriers. This classification is anchored on the premise that the export performance of a firm depends on the availability of specific resources that have to be deployed by the firm and therefore export performance could be affected by lack of intangible resources.

The leather industry in Nigeria offers a huge potential for growth even though it constitutes mainly of SMEs (Amakom, 2006). Nigeria has one of the largest economies in sub-Sahara Africa but it is heavily reliant on oil and gas exports, which makes it very unstable because growth is dependent on prevailing conditions in the global oil industry. The heavy dependency on the oil sector is reflected by the fact that the non-oil sector contributed only 6.5% of GDP in 2010 (Central Bank of Nigeria report, 2010). Hence, in order to develop a balanced economy there is a clear need to boost the growth of the non-oil sector, one of which is the leather industry. Export statistics show that the leather industry posted the strongest non-oil export in 2005 with exports in excess of $160 million (UNCTAD, 2009). However, the industry is struggling to maintain export competitiveness, which is evidenced by the fact that the leather industry accounted for 36.84% of non-oil export in 2004 but only 20.4% in 2005 (UNCTAD, 2009; Amakom, 2006). Research to identify the constraints that are hindering the export growth of this sector is therefore necessary in order to help the industry fulfil its potential growth levels.

Problem Statement

An extensive amount of work has been conducted to investigate issues relating to export barriers and how they affect export performance (Karelakis et al., 2008; Katsikeas & Morgan, 1994) and some of the findings seem to indicate that some export barriers are country-specific (Tesfom & Lutz, 2006; Julian & Ahmed, 2005; Leonidou, 2004). This could be due to a host of factors such as cultural differences, prevailing economic conditions and differences in industry structure in different countries. Even though such findings have been reported, yet still most of the research into the effects of export barriers on export performance has been conducted in developed countries with very little emphasis on developing countries like Nigeria (Okpara & Koumbiadis, 2009; Tesfom & Lutz, 2006; Ibeh, 2004). This could explain how relatively little is known about why Nigerian SMEs in the leather industry are struggling to improve their export performance despite the existing potential. Research on the export performance of Nigerian SMEs in general is very scarce (Okpara & Koumbiadis, 2009) and much more so for those in the leather industry which represents about a fifth of non-oil exports in Nigeria (Amakom, 2006). This gap creates the need for research to be conducted in order to identify and determine the factors that are affecting export performance of SMEs in the Nigerian leather industry. This paper is an analysis of export barriers that are affecting the export performance of Nigerian SMEs in the leather industry. Also, the role of mediating variables has been virtually ignored in past research dealings with export barriers and their impact on export performance. This tendency limits theory building (Arteaga-Ortiz & Fernández-Ortiz, 2010; Cavusgil & Zou, 1994) and the understanding of the mechanisms of how export barriers affect export performance. This study therefore considered the mediating effect of perception of export difficulty on export performance.

Research Objective

This paper has the following objectives

- The identification of export barriers affecting Nigerian SMEs operating in the leather industry.
- Investigating the mediating effect of the perception of export difficulty on export performance.

Literature Review

Any business venture or activity usually involves a significant learning curve during which employees learn and master the skills needed to perform successfully and exporting is no exception. So if a firm does not have or fails to gain the necessary knowhow or skills required to manage exporting activities, success may not be guaranteed. Such skills usually subscribe to the resource-based view in that they are causally ambiguous as well as socially complex and therefore difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). As such, the export barrier literature seems to suggest that lack of knowledge related resources are a source of obstacles to good export performance (Tesfom & Lutz, 2006).

So for instance, when firms lack knowledge about potential export markets or information about business opportunities abroad (Karelakis et al., 2008; Leonidou, 2004; Kaleka & Katsikeas, 1995), it could be difficult for such firms to be involved in exporting activities in any shape or form. Hence, this barrier has been reported to be a major obstacle to export performance (e.g. Li, 2004; Crick, Al Obaidi & Chaudhry, 1998; Morgan & Katsikeas, 1994; Weaver & Pak, 1990). Furthermore, lack of knowledge on how to handle documentations and procedures (Leonidou, 2004; Moini, 1997; Leonidou 1995a) required in the exporting field such as methods of payment, could limit the ability of the firm to be successful in exporting (Arteaga-Ortiz & Fernández-Ortiz, 2010; Morgan & Katsikeas, 1997; Leonidou, 1995b; Kaleka & Katsikeas, 1995; Katsikeas & Morgan, 1994).

Sometimes it is the language differences that exist between the host country and the target export market (Leonidou, 2004) that creates a barrier. Additionally, when firms lack knowledge about the cultural practices of potential foreign markets (Leonidou, 2004) that have different cultural traits from the domestic market (Shoham & Albaum, 1995), it becomes difficult to tailor their products to match the needs of the foreign market and as such export performance could suffer (Arteaga-Ortiz & Fernández-Ortiz, 2010; Karelakis et al., 2008; Julian & Ahmed, 2005; Kaleka & Katsikeas, 1995; Leonidou, 1995b). Hence, the lack of knowledge resources which forms part of an organization's learning process and upon which firms formulate strategy and policy could hamper exporting activities.

As firms engage in the selling of products abroad, they employ various marketing techniques such as product promotion and advertising to ensure the success of their products in the foreign market. Hence, when firms lack the resources required to undertake a viable marketing function abroad, their export performance tends to suffer (Moini, 1997). For instance, findings from past research seem to indicate that adjusting promotional activities to meet the needs required in foreign markets is a hindrance to export performance of SMEs (e.g. Rutihinda, 2008; Leonidou, 2004; Moini, 1997; Morgan & Katsikeas, 1997). In a similar fashion, offering satisfactory prices to customers is another factor that is hinged on the marketing function of the firm and insufficient resources could limit the ability of the firm to offer suitable prices compared to competitors (Rutihinda, 2008; Tesfom & Lutz, 2006; Moini, 1997; Morgan & Katsikeas, 1997; Kaleka & Katsikeas, 1995). Hence, based on the resource-based view lack of marketing resources could affect the ability of the firm to successfully undertake exporting activities. Image/reputation related resources are among those unique and firm specific resources (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) that helps a firm to attain and sustain competitive advantage simply because they are neither substitutable nor imitable. Conversely, when a firm or its products lacks good reputation then it will be hard to compete on the basis of differentiation (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991) and this could affect its export performance. Image related barriers are particularly relevant for developing countries like Nigeria where firms not only have to deal with their own image/reputation issues but also have to contend with country of origin effect (Tesfom & Lutz, 2006; Lall, 1991). That is why Nigerian firms or Nigerian made products have been known to suffer from the country of origin effect, wherein the products labelled made in Nigeria are looked upon as inferior both locally and in international markets (Opara, 2010).

The image related problem is compounded by the fact that most Nigerian SMEs in the leather industry lack any recognizable brand in the first place let alone talk about brand image (da Silva & da Rocha, 2001). Hence, as low content undifferentiated exporters, they face huge and direct competition not only from established global or household brand names but also from any rival that happens to enter the market scene at any time (Tesfom & Lutz, 2006). Hence, consistent with the resource-based view, lack of image related resources are not only barriers in their own right, they could also drag down other resources like financial and marketing which could be brought to bear by firms in order to help counter the low reputation the firm or its products suffer. Based on all the above arguments, Hypothesis H1 and its sub-hypotheses state that:
H1 *intangible resources are positively related with export performance*
H1a: *knowledge resources are positively related with export performance*
H1b: *marketing resources are positively related with export performance*
H1c: *image/reputation resources are positively related with export performance*

The Mediating Effect of Perception of Export Difficulty

The willingness to engage in exporting activities relates with how a firm's management perceive export difficulties such that if export barriers are perceived to be less manageable (Karelakis et al., 2008. Katsikeas & Morgan 1994) management tend to shy away from exporting (Julian & Ahmed, 2005). For example, the time or amount of paperwork involved may be seen as not only confusing but also intimidating (Moini, 1997). Hence, the perception of export complexity could serve as a barrier and therefore limit firms from exploiting their full potential (Julian & Ahmed, 2005; Moini, 1997). Furthermore, it has been reported that firms that perceive fewer risks and barriers to exporting usually display a positive attitude towards exporting and this attitude leads to better export performance (Lages, 2000). Hence, the opposite could also obtain wherein if firms perceive higher risks and barriers to exporting they will have a negative attitude towards exporting which will lead to poor export performance. However, Hise (2001) reported that managers can realize their export objectives if they have a positive belief about exporting irrespective of the difficulties created by export barriers. According to Hise (2001) firms achieve their export objectives by examining the barriers associated with exporting and then use export strategies to deal with them. Hence, perception of export difficulty could help explain how and why lack of intangible resources could affect export performance in a negative way. Hypothesis H2 therefore states that:

H2: *Perception of export difficulty mediates the relationship between intangible resources and export performance*

Figure 1

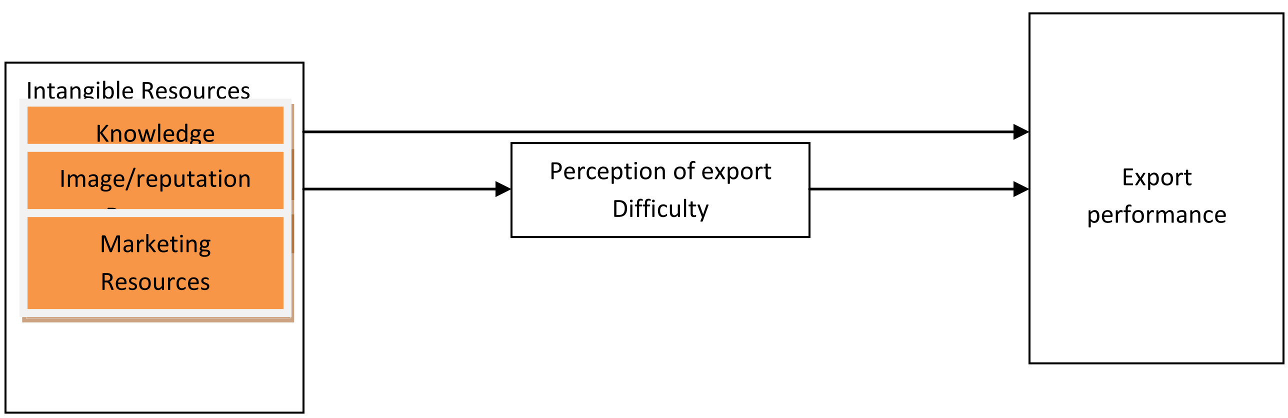

Figure 1 Research Framework

Methodology

The data for this study was collected in North-Western Nigeria and was obtained through the survey method using standard questionnaires. The items that were used to measure the variables in this study were based on theory and largely drawn from the literature. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate their perception of the severity of 35 export barriers on their export performance by using a scale that ranged from 1 (not at all severe) to 7 (very severe).

The SMEs that were contacted for participation in this research were obtained from the list of firms found in three separate sampling frames: (1) Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), (2) the Nigerian Industrial Directory and (3) the Nigerian Exporters directory. In addition, the list of members of the local tannery council in each of the study areas was used to obtain the names of SMEs to include in the sample. Since, multiple sampling frames were used caution was taken to avoid double counting and duplication of SMEs to be included in the target sample and wherever such cases were found the duplication was removed. The final list contained 623 SMEs and to maximize response rate all the SMEs in the list were invited to participate in the survey. After the target sample list was completed, several methods were utilized to distribute the questionnaires to the SMEs in the population of interest. Because of the relatively poor state of the infrastructure in the region where the research was conducted, the major distribution method was the drop off and pick up strategy (Ibeh, 2004) wherein 20 hired enumerators personally dropped off the questionnaires to the SMEs and collected them later. Questionnaires were also posted and emailed to participants in the study.

Results And Discussion

All in all, 623 questionnaires were distributed and 458 were collected over a period of nine weeks for a response rate of about 74%. Out of the 458 collected questionnaires, seven were incomplete and two had been filled by very junior staff that had little knowledge about the exporting functions. Hence, nine questionnaires were excluded, leaving a total of 449 usable questionnaires, which were used for all subsequent data analysis.

With regards to respondent profile, about two-thirds (74%) of SMEs that participated in the survey were non-exporters as can be seen from Table 1. This disproportionate representation serves to highlight the poor state of exporting within the leather sector in Nigeria. In terms of firm size, minimum numbers of employees are the same for both exporters and non-exporters; however, the average and maximum number of employees in exporting firms are greater than non-exporting firms. This indicates that on average exporting firms are relatively larger than non-exporting firms and as such could have access to more resources that are required to involve in exporting activities. The average experience in the exporting business is nine years and the average number of markets abroad is five.

Table 1
Profile of respondents

		Exporters	Non-Exporters
Firms (No)		117 (26%)	332 (74%)
Firm Size (No of employees)	Minimum	10	10
	Average	27	18
	Maximum	120	73
Exporting Experience (Years)	Minimum	3	
	Average	9	
	Maximum	15	
Overseas Market (Countries)	Minimum	2	
	Average	5	
	Maximum	10	

Intangible Resources and Export Performance

Hypotheses testing were done through multiple regression analysis and the result for the analysis of intangible resources and export performance is shown in Table 2. Looking at the table reveals that R-square is 0.516 which means that the independent variables (knowledge resources, image resources and marketing resources) explain about 52% of the variance observed in the dependent variable (export performance). The ANOVA table shows that the model demonstrates acceptable fit ($p < 0.001$) and the variance inflation factor (VIF) is below five indicating that there are no major issues with multicollinearity. The model thus demonstrates an acceptable level of fit. Looking at the coefficient table of Table 2, it can be seen that all three variables; knowledge resources ($p = 0.012$), image resources ($p < 0.001$) and marketing resources ($p < 0.001$) are all significant, thus suggesting that they can explain variations in the dependent variable (export performance). These findings seem to support hypotheses H1a to H1c which suggested that knowledge related resources, image related resources and marketing related resources are all positively associated with export performance and therefore intangible resources have a positive relationship with export performance. The magnitude of the relationships seems to indicate that image (0.54) related resources have a relatively stronger relationship with export performance compared to knowledge (0.11) related resources and marketing (0.17) related resources. The directions of the relationships seem to support the position of this study that lack of tangible resources leads to poor export performance. The following equation thus represents the relationship between tangible resources and export performance where KR is knowledge resources, IR is image resources and MR is marketing resources.

Export performance = 21.84 + (0.11KR) + (0.54IR) + (0.17MR)

Table 2
Multiple regression analysis of intangible resources and export performance

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.719[a]	.516	.513	6.013

a. Predictors: (Constant), Marketing Resources, Image Resources, Knowledge Resources

ANOVA[b]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	17179.937	3	5726.646	158.396	.000[a]
	Residual	16088.504	445	36.154		
	Total	33268.441	448			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Marketing Resources, Image Resources, Knowledge Resources
b. Dependent Variable: Export Performance

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	21.837	1.251		17.454	.000		
	Knowledge Resources	.108	.042	.111	2.534	.012	.563	1.777
	Image Resources	1.101	.082	.542	13.408	.000	.664	1.506
	Marketing Resources	.327	.093	.166	3.508	.000	.483	2.072

a. Dependent Variable: Export Performance

This would mean for example that when firms lack the necessary knowhow or skills required to manage exporting activities, success may not be guaranteed. Likewise, when firms lack knowledge about potential export markets or information about business opportunities abroad

International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences
October 2012, Vol. 2, No. 10
ISSN: 2222-6990

(Karelakis et al., 2008; Leonidou, 2004; Kaleka & Katsikeas, 1995), there could be no rational to engage in exporting activities. Additionally, when firms lack knowledge about the cultural practices of potential foreign markets (Leonidou, 2004) it becomes difficult to adjust their products to match the needs of those markets and as such export performance could suffer (Arteaga-Ortiz & Fernández-Ortiz, 2010; Karelakis et al., 2008; Julian & Ahmed, 2005; Kaleka & Katsikeas, 1995; Leonidou, 1995b). Also, when firms lack the resources required to undertake a viable marketing function abroad, that would allow them to fit promotional activities to meet the needs required in foreign markets their export performance tends to suffer (Moini, 1997). Equally so when firms cannot compete on the basis of differentiation (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991) because they lack recognizable brands or suffer from reputation issues as a result of country of origin effect (Tesfom & Lutz, 2006; Lall, 1991), then export performance could be affected in a negative way. Hence, consistent with the resource-based view, the possession of intangible resources such as knowledge and image related resources could be necessary for good export performance. Intangible resources are particularly important to SMEs as they are causally ambiguous as well as socially complex and therefore difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991).

The Mediating Role of Perception of Export Difficulty

A combination of regression analysis and Sobel's test was used to test for mediation effects. Firstly, a regression analysis was run with intangible resources as the independent variable and perception of export difficulty (mediating variable) as the dependent variable. A second equation was run with intangible resources as the independent variable and export performance as the dependent variable. Finally, a third analysis was done with both intangible resources and perception of export difficulty as independent variables and export performance as dependent variable. The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 3. To run the Sobel's test, the t-values from the first and the third analysis were then imputed into the following interactive website designed to calculate p-values for Sobel's test: http://quantpsy.org/sobel/sobel.htm

Table 3
Regression analysis for test of mediating effects

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	16.244	.654		24.857	.000		
	Intangible Resources	-.063	.010	-.285	-6.290	.000	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Perception of Export Difficulty

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	23.342	1.372		17.011	.000		
	Intangible Resources	.366	.021	.635	17.386	.000	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Export Performance

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	37.561	1.927		19.490	.000		
	Intangible Resources	.311	.020	.539	15.550	.000	.919	1.089
	Perception of Export Difficulty	-.875	.090	-.336	-9.686	.000	.919	1.089

a. Dependent Variable: Export Performance

Looking at Table 3, it can be seen that intangible resources is significantly related to perception of export difficulty (Beta = - 0.285, $p < 0.001$). The relationship is negative in the sense that when intangible resources such as knowledge resources are high, perception of export difficulty is low and vice versa. For instance, when firms have sufficient knowledge about exporting activities, they tend to correctly interpret available information and thus recognize the opportunities that exist in foreign markets (Julian & Ahmed, 2005).

From Table 3, it can also be seen that perception of export difficulty is also significantly related with export performance (Beta = - 0.34, $p < 0.001$) thus suggesting that it mediates the relationship between intangible resources and export performance. The direction of the relationship is also negative, which would suggest that as perception of export difficulty increases, export performance will suffer. Furthermore, the Sobel's test returned a significant p-value that is less than 0.001 and based on this hypothesis H2 which claims that perception of export difficulty mediates the relationship between intangible resources and export performance seems to be supported by the data. However, since the relationship between intangible resources and export performance is still significant, it seems perception of export difficulty has only a partial mediating effect. This could mean that the willingness to engage in exporting activities relates with how a firm perceives export difficulties such that if export barriers are perceived to be less manageable (Karelakis et al., 2008. Katsikeas & Morgan 1994), the firm may shy away from exporting (Julian & Ahmed, 2005) but on the other hand if intangible resources and capabilities like knowledge and image resources are high then the firm could overcome export barriers thereby improving its export performance.

This is consistent with the view that the willingness of firms to engage in exporting activities relates with how a firm's management perceive export difficulties such that if export barriers are perceived to be less manageable (Karelakis et al., 2008. Katsikeas & Morgan 1994) they tend to shy away from exporting (Julian & Ahmed). For example, the amount of red tape or bureaucracy that may be involved could intimidate inexperienced exporters (Moini, 1997). However, since intangible resources are still significantly related with export performance (Beta = 0.539, $p < 0.001$), it implies that the possession of intangible resources could mitigate the impact of perception of export difficulty and thus allow firms to overcome the psychological barrier that prevents them from initiating and sustaining exporting activities (Leonidou, 2004).

Conclusions And Managerial Implications

From the regression analysis, examination of the model fit measures showed that they were all within the conventionally accepted values and the regression estimates showed that all of the hypothesized relationships were not only significant but in the expected directions. All of the hypotheses posited in the research framework were supported by the data, thus suggesting that the theoretical framework fits the data.

The findings of this research offer many practical contributions to SMEs in the Nigerian leather industry in particular and all stakeholders in general. Among the foremost is the additional evidence that seems to indicate that export barriers are very much a concern for SMEs in the leather industry. These findings raise the need for remedial steps to be taken to address this concern. A number of steps could be taking to ease the effect of export barriers on SMEs. For instance, to deal with lack of knowledge resources, export training and education should be provided by government or policy makers through workshops and seminars to SMEs interested in exporting (Okpara & Koumbiadis, 2009). SMEs could also come together to form associations through which they can share best practices on how to deal with export barriers. A special body could be created that could disseminate information such as prevailing market conditions in both the local and designated target markets, latest prices and industry tips to SMEs as a way of remedying the difficulty for many SMEs to obtain relevant information on their own. With regards to image/reputation related problems, an industry standards body should be created to monitor and report on the quality of the products so that poor quality products can be identified and removed from the supply chain before they taint the rest of the products. Policy makers can also step in with a broader support platform by investing in advertising in both domestic and foreign markets to sell the "made in Nigeria brand".

Readers should be caution though that this study is cross-sectional in nature, a fact which may have limited its ability to fully capture the whole phenomenon of export barriers and export performance as all data analysis and hence conclusions were dependent on a snapshot of time. Even though, the data collection instrument used in this study was phrased in such a way as not to impose a time frame for the responses to the questions, a longitudinal approach could provide a better picture of the association between export barriers and SME export performance.

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