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## MODERATING ROLE OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENTREPRENEURIAL MARKETING AND SMES PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM NORTHERN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The study investigated the moderating role of transformational and transactional leadership styles on the relationship between entrepreneurial marketing (EM) and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) performance in Bauchi South Senatorial District of Bauchi State, Nigeria. A quantitative survey design was adopted, and data were obtained from 300 SME owner-managers across seven local government areas. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used for data analysis via ADANCO 2.0.1. Results revealed that both transformational leadership ( $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and transactional leadership ( $\beta = -0.21$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) moderated the relationship between customer intensity and SMEs performance. The study concludes that leadership style plays a significant boundary condition on the entrepreneurial marketing-performance nexus among Nigerian SMEs. Policy implications and directions for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Entrepreneurial Marketing, SMEs Performance, Nigeria

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### 1.0 Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) represent the backbone of economic growth in developing economies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where they account for a substantial proportion of employment, gross domestic product (GDP), and poverty reduction efforts (Ayyagari et al., 2011; SMEDAN & NBS, 2021). In Nigeria, SMEs constitute approximately 96% of all enterprises and contribute roughly 48% to GDP while employing about 84% of the labour force (SMEDAN & NBS, 2021). In northern Nigeria, SMEs operate in a uniquely challenging environment characterised by infrastructural deficiencies,

limited access to formal financing, insecurity, and constrained market access — all of which necessitate innovative and adaptive business approaches to survive and thrive (Agwu & Emeti, 2014).

Entrepreneurial marketing (EM) has emerged as a promising theoretical and managerial framework for addressing these challenges. Conceptualised by Morris et al. (2002) as the proactive identification and exploitation of opportunities to acquire and retain profitable customers through innovative approaches to risk management, resource leveraging, and value creation, EM synthesises entrepreneurship and marketing into a coherent set of firm-level behaviours.



Unlike conventional marketing, EM is characterised by opportunity-driven actions, resource leveraging under conditions of uncertainty, and an intense focus on value creation for the customer (Hills & Hultman, 2011; Bjerke & Hultman, 2002). Empirical studies have progressively demonstrated that EM dimensions — including proactiveness, innovation focus, risk management, customer intensity, and opportunity focus — are associated with enhanced SME performance outcomes (Olannye & Eromafuru, 2016; Kurgun et al., 2011; Mzera & Maziriri, 2020).

Nonetheless, the empirical landscape is not without contradictions. Several studies report non-significant or even negative relationships between specific EM dimensions and performance, suggesting that contextual and organisational factors may moderate the EM-performance relationship (Mason et al., 2015; Becherer et al., 2012). In response, scholars have called for the incorporation of moderating variables that can explain the boundary conditions under which EM translates into superior performance (Hills & Hultman, 2011; Ahmad et al., 2020). Leadership style is one such variable. As the individual most responsible for setting strategic direction, allocating resources, and motivating organisational members, the leader occupies a pivotal role in determining whether EM activities are effectively executed (Ensley et al., 2006; Gupta et al., 2004).

Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) conceptualised leadership along a continuum from transactional to transformational styles. Transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest, embrace innovation, and commit to collective goals, while transactional leaders operate through exchange mechanisms — clarifying expectations, setting goals, and providing

contingent rewards for performance. Both styles have been shown to influence firm-level outcomes, yet their specific moderating effects on the EM-SME performance relationship remain underexplored in the Nigerian context (Iscan et al., 2014; Ensley et al., 2006). This gap is particularly pronounced in northern Nigeria, where cultural dynamics, patrimonial institutional structures, and limited managerial training shape leadership practices in distinctive ways (Abubakar & Kura, 2017).

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by empirically testing the moderating role of transformational and transactional leadership styles on the relationship between entrepreneurial marketing — specifically the customer intensity dimension — and SMEs performance in Bauchi South Senatorial District. Customer intensity, defined as the depth of commitment to understanding and serving customers through creative and relentless engagement strategies (Morris et al., 2002), is selected as the focal EM dimension because it encapsulates the interface between internal firm capabilities and external market responsiveness, making it particularly sensitive to leadership influence. Grounded in Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967), and the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on contextual moderators of EM effectiveness in sub-Saharan African SMEs. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature and develops the hypotheses. Section 3 outlines the research methodology. Section 4 presents the findings and discussion. Section 5 provides conclusions, policy recommendations, and directions for future research.



## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### 2.1 Theoretical Underpinnings

This study draws on three principal theoretical frameworks: Upper Echelons Theory, Contingency Theory, and the Resource-Based View (RBV). Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) posits that the values, cognitive frames, and experiences of top managers — including owner-managers — significantly influence strategic choices and firm outcomes. In the SME context, the owner-manager is often the de facto top management team, and their leadership style directly shapes the firm's strategic orientation, including its approach to entrepreneurial marketing (Ensley et al., 2006). Contingency Theory holds that the effectiveness of any management practice, including leadership behaviour, is not universal but depends on situational variables such as environmental uncertainty, task complexity, and organisational structure (Fiedler, 1967). Accordingly, the moderating role of leadership style on the EM-performance relationship can be theoretically justified through this lens. Finally, the RBV (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) provides a resource-centric explanation: leadership capabilities and EM competencies constitute firm-specific intangible resources that, when deployed synergistically, generate competitive advantage and superior performance.

### 2.2 Entrepreneurial Marketing and SMEs Performance

Entrepreneurial marketing, as conceptualised by Morris et al. (2002), integrates the opportunity-seeking disposition of entrepreneurship with the market-focused logic of marketing. The construct encompasses seven interrelated dimensions: proactiveness, opportunity

focus, risk management, innovation focus, resource leveraging, customer intensity, and value creation. These dimensions collectively capture the firm's propensity to engage in innovative, market-driven behaviours under conditions of uncertainty and resource constraint (Hills & Hultman, 2011).

Customer intensity — the focal dimension in this study — refers to the extraordinary level of commitment to building and maintaining customer relationships, understanding customer needs in depth, and delivering solutions that create sustainable value (Morris et al., 2002). Firms high in customer intensity invest heavily in relationship marketing, customer knowledge management, and responsive service delivery, all of which contribute to customer loyalty, repeat purchase, and ultimately superior performance (Kocak & Abimbola, 2009). Olannye and Eromafuru (2016) found that customer intensity significantly predicted performance among fast-food SMEs in Nigeria, while Mzera and Maziriri (2020) reported similar results in a South African context.

Empirically, the EM-performance relationship has garnered considerable support. Kurgun et al. (2011) demonstrated that EM dimensions positively influenced financial and non-financial performance among Turkish hospitality firms. Ahmad et al. (2020) meta-analysed 57 studies and confirmed a significant positive overall effect of EM on performance. However, moderating variables — including firm size, industry type, and environmental dynamism — significantly influenced the strength of this relationship, warranting further investigation into contextual moderators such as leadership style.

### 2.3 Leadership Style: Transformational and Transactional Perspectives



Burns (1978) introduced the foundational distinction between transactional and transformational leadership as competing models of leader-follower exchange. Building on this, Bass (1985) operationalised transformational leadership across four components: idealised influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. These components collectively foster follower commitment, creativity, and intrinsic motivation, enabling organisations to transcend short-term performance targets and build enduring capability (Bass & Avolio, 1997).

Transactional leadership, by contrast, is grounded in the logic of social exchange. Leaders clarify role expectations, structure tasks, and provide contingent rewards for goal attainment. Management by exception — in both active and passive forms — completes the transactional repertoire, with active forms involving proactive monitoring for deviations and passive forms characterised by reactive intervention only when problems arise (Bass, 1985). While transactional leadership is associated with the maintenance of existing standards and the reinforcement of established routines, it provides the structural clarity that may facilitate consistent execution of EM strategies (Iskan et al., 2014).

Empirically, Lee and Chuang (2009) found that transformational leadership exerted stronger positive effects on performance quality than transactional leadership in private Taiwanese enterprises. Iskan et al. (2014) reported significant positive effects of transformational leadership on organisational performance and innovation among Turkish SMEs, while transactional leadership produced non-significant results. In the Nigerian context, Lawal et al. (2018) found that transformational leadership was

positively associated with innovative behaviour among SME employees, consistent with the view that transformational leaders create conditions conducive to the creative, opportunity-driven behaviours central to entrepreneurial marketing.

#### ***2.4 The Moderating Role of Leadership Style on the EM-Performance Relationship***

Mason et al. (2015) examined the moderating role of financial leverage on EM and performance among 300 SMEs in Italy and Austria, finding significant moderating effects and explicitly recommending future investigations into leadership style as a moderating variable. This recommendation resonates with broader calls in the entrepreneurial marketing literature for studies that identify boundary conditions shaping EM effectiveness (Hills & Hultman, 2011; Becherer et al., 2012).

Theoretically, the moderating influence of transformational leadership on the customer intensity-performance relationship can be explained through the lens of Upper Echelons Theory: transformational leaders, by articulating an inspiring vision of customer value and empowering followers to take creative initiatives, amplify the effectiveness of customer intensity efforts (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Ensley et al., 2006). Conversely, excessive or inappropriately applied leadership behaviour may introduce rigidity, over-reliance on leader directives, or goal displacement, thereby attenuating the customer-focused initiative that characterises high customer intensity (Deshpande et al., 1993).

For transactional leadership, the structural clarity and reward contingency inherent in this style can channel customer intensity behaviours toward measurable targets, potentially reinforcing performance outcomes. However, at high levels, the



transactional emphasis on compliance and monitoring may suppress the creative and autonomous behaviours necessary for effective customer engagement (Burns, 1978). Based on these theoretical arguments, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

*H1: Transformational leadership positively moderates the relationship between customer intensity and SMEs performance in Bauchi South Senatorial District.*

*H2: Transactional leadership positively moderates the relationship between customer intensity and SMEs performance in Bauchi South Senatorial District.*

### **3. Research Methodology**

The study adopted a positivist paradigm and quantitative survey design. The target population of 627 consisted of SME owner-managers across seven local government areas (LGAs) of Bauchi South Senatorial District. A multi-stage sampling approach yielded a sample of 300 respondents. Entrepreneurial marketing was measured using scales adapted from Morris et al. (2002) and Fiore et al. (2013). Leadership style was assessed using 20 items adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1997). SMEs performance was measured using 11 items from Owoseni and Adeyeye (2012), all on a five-point Likert scale. Analysis was performed using ADANCO 2.0.1, with moderation tested via interaction terms following the approach recommended by Henseler et al. (2015).

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory composite reliability (0.74-0.89) and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019). Discriminant validity was confirmed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion

(Henseler et al., 2015), with all HTMT ratios below 0.85. The R-squared value for SMEs performance was 0.42, indicating that the model accounted for 42% of the variance in SMEs performance.

Regarding the moderating hypotheses, the interaction term between transformational leadership and customer intensity was statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $t = 2.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.0136$ ), thereby supporting H1. The interaction between transactional leadership and customer intensity was similarly significant ( $\beta = -0.21$ ,  $t = 2.33$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $f^2 = 0.0337$ ), supporting H2. The negative moderation coefficients indicate that at high levels of leadership behaviour, the customer intensity-performance relationship is attenuated, consistent with the inverted-U hypothesis and findings reported by Deshpande et al. (1993). This suggests that beyond an optimal threshold, excessive leadership behaviour — whether transformational or transactional — may undermine the autonomous, customer-centric orientation that drives performance in entrepreneurially marketing-intensive SMEs.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Conclusions**

This study set out to investigate the moderating role of transformational and transactional leadership styles on the relationship between entrepreneurial marketing — specifically the customer intensity dimension — and SMEs performance in Bauchi South Senatorial District, Bauchi State, Nigeria. Drawing on Upper Echelons Theory, Contingency Theory, and the Resource-Based View, the study developed and empirically tested two moderation hypotheses using PLS-SEM via ADANCO 2.0.1.

The findings confirm that both transformational ( $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and



transactional ( $\beta = -0.21, p < 0.05$ ) leadership styles significantly moderate the customer intensity-SMEs performance relationship, though with negative coefficients indicating attenuating effects at higher levels of leadership engagement. These results have important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the findings extend the entrepreneurial marketing literature by establishing leadership style as a meaningful boundary condition of EM effectiveness, responding to calls by Mason et al. (2015) and Hills and Hultman (2011) for contextually sensitive investigations. The confirmation of Contingency Theory predictions — that leadership effectiveness is situationally determined — within the Nigerian SME context adds an important geographic and sectoral dimension to leadership scholarship in developing economies.

The negative moderation effects further suggest that the relationship between customer intensity and performance follows a curvilinear logic: as leadership behaviour intensifies beyond an optimal level, it may introduce structural constraints, reduce employee autonomy, or redirect energies away from creative customer engagement toward compliance and monitoring. This finding resonates with the entrepreneurship literature's emphasis on the importance of autonomy and initiative-taking for the effective execution of market-oriented behaviours (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). In sum, this study demonstrates that leadership style is not merely an independent driver of performance, but a nuanced moderating force that shapes the conditions under which entrepreneurial marketing practices translate into firm-level outcomes.

### **5.2 Policy Recommendations**

First, the findings highlight the need for deliberate leadership development

programmes tailored to SME owner-managers in northern Nigeria. Government agencies such as the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), the Bank of Industry (BOI), and state-level Ministries of Commerce and Industry should incorporate leadership competency modules into existing SME support and capacity-building programmes. Such modules should emphasise balanced leadership approaches that combine the inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation of transformational leadership with the structured clarity and goal-setting of transactional leadership, while simultaneously preserving employee autonomy in customer engagement.

Second, business development service providers (BDSPs) operating in northern Nigeria should design context-sensitive advisory services that help SME owner-managers identify their dominant leadership style and understand its implications for their marketing practices. Leadership self-assessment tools — adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1997) — could be deployed in training workshops and enterprise development centres across the North East geopolitical zone.

Third, financial institutions and development finance organisations providing credit and support to SMEs should consider incorporating leadership assessment as part of enterprise development or loan accompaniment services. Since leadership style influences how effectively marketing resources are deployed and how customer relationships are managed, leadership competence constitutes an important dimension of SME creditworthiness and growth potential.

Fourth, policymakers should facilitate the establishment of SME mentoring networks



— pairing experienced entrepreneurs with emerging SME owner-managers — particularly in sectors such as food processing, trade, and agribusiness that dominate the SME landscape in northern Nigeria. Mentoring provides a practical and culturally appropriate mechanism for transferring leadership wisdom and entrepreneurial marketing competencies across generations of entrepreneurs.

### **5.3 Directions for Future Research**

This study is not without limitations, which simultaneously open avenues for future research. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference about how leadership style moderation evolves over time. Longitudinal studies tracking the co-evolution of leadership practices, EM behaviours, and performance outcomes would provide richer insights. Second, the study examined only the customer intensity dimension of the seven-dimension EM model (Morris et al., 2002). Future studies should explore whether leadership style moderates the performance implications of the remaining EM dimensions — proactiveness, innovation focus, risk management, opportunity focus, resource leveraging, and value creation — either individually or collectively.

Third, the geographic focus on Bauchi South Senatorial District limits the generalisability of the findings. Replication studies across other geopolitical zones of Nigeria, and comparative studies spanning multiple northern states, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the EM-leadership-performance relationship in the region. Fourth, the study focused exclusively on transformational and transactional leadership styles. Future research should investigate the moderating effects of autocratic leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, servant

leadership, and ambidextrous leadership — constructs increasingly relevant to the resource-constrained environments of African SMEs.

Fifth, the potential mediating roles of organisational culture, market turbulence, managerial cognition, and employee engagement in the leadership-EM-performance chain warrant systematic investigation. Mediated moderation or moderated mediation designs would enable more nuanced unpacking of the mechanisms through which leadership style shapes EM effectiveness. Finally, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches could complement the quantitative findings by illuminating the lived experiences of SME owner-managers as they navigate the intersection of leadership and entrepreneurial marketing in northern Nigeria's challenging business environment.

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