DOI: https://doi.org/10.68022/kajofi.2026.vcywwi8d

KASU JOURNAL OF FINANCE VOL 1(1) 2026 ISSN: 3141-2017

MEDIATING ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL COMPETENCE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENTREPRENEURIAL, MARKET, AND LEARNING ORIENTATION AMONG SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES' PERFORMANCE IN KADUNA STATE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Despite the significant contribution of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to employment generation and economic development, their performance in Nigeria remains relatively low compared to similar emerging economies. Past studies have established that entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, and learning orientation positively affect SMEs' performance; however, the mechanisms through which these strategic orientations translate into tangible results remain underexplored. This paper therefore proposes a conceptual framework examining the effect of entrepreneurial, market, and learning orientations on SMEs' performance, with entrepreneurial competence as a mediating variable. The paper is anchored on the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory of the firm. Drawing extensively on existing empirical and theoretical literature, the paper develops and justifies a set of propositions that link each of the three strategic orientations to SMEs' performance, both directly and indirectly through entrepreneurial competence. The paper argues that entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, and learning orientation each positively influences SMEs' performance, and that entrepreneurial competence partially mediates these relationships. The paper concludes that strategic orientations are critical drivers of SMEs' success but their effectiveness largely depends on the entrepreneur's competence in translating these orientations into actionable strategies. Implications for theory, practice, and policy are discussed.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, learning orientation, entrepreneurial competence, SME performance, Resource Based View.

Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are fundamental to modern economies, playing a key role in creating jobs, promoting economic diversification, spreading innovation, and supporting inclusive growth in both developed and developing countries. Globally, SMEs make up more than 90 percent of registered businesses, account for over half of total employment, and contribute between 40 and 60 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2024). In the United States, SMEs constitute 99.9 percent of all firms and employ nearly half of the private sector workforce (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2023). In developing economies, SMEs play an even more critical role due to their labour-intensive operations and widespread presence in both rural and urban areas. In Indonesia, they contribute around 61 percent of GDP and generate nearly 89 percent of total employment (ASEAN SME Policy Index, 2022), while in India, SMEs account for approximately 30 percent of GDP and provide employment for over 110 million people (International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2024). In sub-Saharan Africa, SMEs are responsible for nearly 80 percent of jobs and contribute an average of 40 percent to GDP (African Development Bank Group [AfDB], 2024).

In Nigeria, SMEs constitute about 96 percent of all businesses, employ around 59 million people, and account for over 80 percent of the labour force, yet they contribute only about 49.8 percent of national GDP, a share noticeably lower than that of comparable economies like Ghana and Indonesia (SMEDAN & NBS, 2021; World Bank, 2024). This gap reveals a persistent productivity and performance challenge within the Nigerian SME sector. In narrowing it to Kaduna State, the state is ranked among Nigeria's top five SME hubs, hosting 38,908 formal micro, small, and medium enterprises (SMEDAN & NBS, 2021). Despite this, performance indicators for SMEs in Kaduna State have shown declining trends in recent years, with growing vulnerability under sustained macroeconomic pressures.

Although SMEs in Kaduna State are increasingly adopting entrepreneurial, market-oriented, and learning-focused practices, these behavioural shifts have not consistently translated into lasting performance improvements. In the Nigerian context, firm-level behavioural orientations, entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, and learning orientation, have emerged as key determinants of SME performance. These orientations often coexist in SMEs and jointly shape managerial decision making, strategic choices, and opportunity exploitation. Nigerian empirical studies consistently report positive direct effects of these orientations on SME performance (Abubakar et al.,

2024; Gborogbosi & Chikwe, 2025; Aliyu et al., 2025). Nonetheless, most analyses rely on direct effect models, implicitly assuming that merely adopting these orientations is sufficient to achieve performance gains, thereby oversimplifying the orientation-performance relationship and overlooking the central role of the individual entrepreneur.

Entrepreneurial competence offers a theoretically grounded explanation for the observed gap between firm-level behavioural orientations and SME performance. It refers to the cognitive, managerial, and behavioural capabilities that enable entrepreneurs to recognise opportunities, interpret market signals, mobilise resources, and implement decisions effectively. From the perspective of the Resource-Based View and dynamic capabilities theory, entrepreneurial competence represents a critical human capability through which firms sense opportunities, seize resources, and reconfigure operations in response to environmental changes (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2018). Despite growing recognition of its relevance, few Nigerian studies have examined entrepreneurial competence as a mediating mechanism linking firm-level behavioural orientations to SME performance (Babatunde, 2025; Akinwale et al., 2024).

Based on the foregoing, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that positions entrepreneurial competence as a mediating variable in the relationships between entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, learning orientation, and SME performance in Kaduna State.

Literature Review and Propositions

Concept of SME Performance

The concept of SME performance has evolved into a multidimensional construct that reflects the degree to which enterprises achieve financial and non-financial goals under resource constraints. Beyond profitability and revenue growth, SME performance now encompasses indicators such as customer satisfaction, innovation capacity, adaptability, and long-term sustainability (Keelson et al., 2024; Alshahrani & Salam, 2024; Maingehama, 2025). This expanded view recognizes that success for SMEs involves both tangible and intangible outcomes that collectively determine competitiveness and survival in dynamic markets.

SMEDAN and NBS (2021) classification defines small enterprises as those employing 10–49 persons with annual turnover between ₦25 million and ₦100 million, and medium enterprises as those employing 50–199 persons with turnover between ₦100 million and ₦1 billion. This classification provides the foundation for assessing performance outcomes within the structural realities of Nigerian SMEs, where firm size and turnover often moderate strategic decision making and growth potential. In this paper, SME performance is conceptualized following Keelson et al. (2024) as a continuous process of achieving desired business outcomes that reflect the ability of a firm to meet stakeholder expectations, encompassing financial indicators such as sales growth, market expansion, competitiveness, customer acquisition, and strategic alignment.

Concept of Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO)

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) represents the strategic posture and behavioral tendencies of a firm that enable it to identify, evaluate, and exploit opportunities in uncertain environments. Miller (1983) first conceptualized EO as a firm's ability to innovate, take risks, and act proactively ahead of competitors. Building on this foundation, Covin and Lumpkin (2011) operationalized EO as a multidimensional construct comprising innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. Firms with strong EO tendencies typically emphasize experimentation, risk-taking, and market leadership, using creativity and calculated boldness to outperform competitors (Alqahtani et al., 2024; Alkharafi et al., 2024). In the SME context, EO is especially critical because such firms often lack extensive financial and structural resources; thus, their survival depends on the entrepreneur's ability to leverage innovative ideas and proactive behavior to capture emerging opportunities (Adam et al., 2024; Abubakar et al., 2024).

Concept of Market Orientation (MO)

Market orientation (MO) is a core construct in strategic management and marketing literature that reflects how firms gather, disseminate, and respond to market intelligence about customers, competitors, and environmental forces (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Narver & Slater, 1990). Kohli and Jaworski (1990) defined MO as the intelligence-generating, disseminating, and responsive activities of an organization aimed at understanding current and future customer needs. Narver and Slater (1990) conceptualized MO as a business culture composed of customer orientation, competitor orientation, and interfunctional coordination, all of which drive superior performance through customer-focused decision making. Recent studies reaffirm MO's strategic importance for SMEs, particularly in dynamic and uncertain environments (Alshahrani & Salam, 2024; Yuwono et al., 2025; Larabi, 2025). In this paper, MO is conceptualized as a strategic orientation and behavioral capability through which SMEs sense, interpret, and respond to market intelligence to create superior customer value.

Concept of Learning Orientation (LO)

Learning orientation (LO) represents an enterprise-wide philosophy that values knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and application as pathways to sustained competitive advantage. It embodies the organizational culture that encourages continuous learning, experimentation, and the questioning of existing assumptions to adapt and innovate in changing environments (Baker & Sinkula, 1999; Calantone et al., 2002). According to Sinkula, Baker, and Noordewier (1997), learning orientation reflects an organization's commitment to acquiring, disseminating, and using knowledge to enhance strategic and operational effectiveness. Recent studies show that learning-oriented firms are more adaptive and innovative because they actively integrate new knowledge into their business routines and decision-making systems (Karpacz & Wójcik-Karpacz, 2024).

Concept of Entrepreneurial Competence (EC)

Entrepreneurial competence refers to the integrated capacity of the entrepreneur to identify and evaluate opportunities, mobilize and coordinate resources, make informed decisions under uncertainty, and implement strategies effectively (Man et al., 2002). Wei (2009) clarified the operational dimension of entrepreneurial competence as the total capacity of an entrepreneur to perform effectively across diverse business functions. Unlike firm-level orientations, which reflect strategic posture or intent, entrepreneurial competence is situated at the individual level and determines an entrepreneur's ability to convert intent into action. From the RBV and dynamic capabilities perspective, entrepreneurial competence represents a critical human capability that enables firms to sense opportunities, seize resources, and reconfigure operations in response to environmental changes (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2018). Empirical studies support the view that entrepreneurial competence enhances SME performance by facilitating the translation of opportunity recognition, market knowledge, and learning-oriented intent into tangible outcomes (Dan Ibrahim et al., 2025; Nasution et al., 2024).

Entrepreneurial Orientation and SME Performance

The relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SME performance is well-established in the literature. Abodunde (2024) investigated how the dimensions of EO, innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking, affect SME performance in Oyo State and found that all three dimensions significantly enhance profitability and market share, though the study also noted that firms with limited access to credit benefited less from EO, implying that resource availability conditions EO's performance effects. Mustapha, Abdulrahaman, and Kabiru (2023) similarly found that EO significantly predicts financial and non-financial performance, particularly when firms operate in supportive institutional environments.

Kiyabo and Isaga (2020) demonstrated through structural equation modelling that competitive advantage mediates the EO-performance relationship, meaning EO-driven firms perform better primarily because they create distinctive market advantages. In the Indonesian context, Hanoum et al. (2025) found that EO enables firms to balance exploration and exploitation while leveraging digital technologies to enhance competitiveness, positioning EO as a dynamic mechanism linking strategic flexibility to improved performance. Taken together, the preponderance of evidence supports a positive relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SME performance. Based on this synthesis of extant literature, the following proposition is advanced:

Proposition 1: Entrepreneurial orientation has an effect on SME performance in Kaduna State.

Market Orientation and SME Performance

The effect of market orientation on SME performance is similarly robust across multiple geographical and sectoral contexts. Tessema et al. (2024) examined micro and small enterprises in Ethiopia and found that customer orientation and interfunctional coordination significantly influence firm performance, with start-up capital and institutional support moderating the relationship. Their findings highlight that MO's benefits depend on both internal coordination and external enablers. Akanpaaba et al. (2023) investigated Ghanaian SMEs and found that MO positively influences performance, partially mediated by new product development capability — indicating that MO is effective only when internal innovation capabilities operationalize market intelligence into tangible outcomes.

Guerra and Camargo (2024) studied industrial SMEs in Brazil and found that MO fosters learning processes, which in turn significantly enhance innovation and profitability, thus confirming that MO supports firm performance by stimulating organizational learning and adaptive capacity. Manafe et al. (2024) demonstrated that MO's impact on performance is contingent on the presence of technical expertise, social capital, and innovation capability, aligning with RBV by positioning MO as a resource that requires complementary capabilities. Orbaningsih et al. (2024) confirmed that MO interacts with organizational climate to enhance performance outcomes, with firms displaying open communication and participative management deriving greater benefits from MO. Based on this body of evidence, the following proposition is advanced:

Proposition 2: Market orientation has an effect on SME performance in Kaduna State.

Learning Orientation and SME Performance

Evidence supporting the positive effect of learning orientation on SME performance is similarly compelling. Domi et al. (2020) found that LO directly enhances responsiveness to customer needs through improved knowledge dissemination and employee empowerment among Albanian SMEs, reinforcing the argument that learning culture drives customer-centric innovation. Kapoor and Kumar (2019) demonstrated that learning-oriented Indian SMEs achieve superior alignment between business practices and customer expectations, establishing LO as a critical enabler of strategic alignment. Karpacz and Wójcik-Karpacz (2024) found that LO positively affects firm performance, particularly when combined with dynamic capabilities, promoting adaptability and proactive decision making under uncertainty.

Yang et al. (2022) demonstrated that LO fosters product innovation and resilience in turbulent environments among Chinese new ventures, while Nnko et al. (2024) confirmed that commitment to learning, open-mindedness, and shared vision significantly enhance responsiveness to customer needs in resource-constrained contexts. Fatoki (2024) established that learning culture fosters psychological safety and open communication, encouraging both incremental and radical innovations among Nigerian SMEs. Cumulatively, these studies support the argument that learning orientation is a significant driver of SME performance. Accordingly, the following proposition is advanced:

Proposition 3: Learning orientation has an effect on SME performance in Kaduna State.

Mediating Role of Entrepreneurial Competence

Beyond direct effects, the literature suggests that entrepreneurial competence plays a critical mediating role in linking strategic orientations to performance outcomes. The rationale is that orientations represent organizational intent and posture, while entrepreneurial competence represents the individual-level capacity to operationalize that intent. An entrepreneur may display innovativeness, risk-taking, or market responsiveness, but without the requisite managerial and cognitive competencies, such orientations may not translate into measurable performance gains.

Regarding the mediation of EO, Lukman et al. (2023) found that entrepreneurial competence mediates the relationship between EO and performance, revealing that EO alone does not guarantee success unless firms possess the requisite managerial and technical skills to implement entrepreneurial initiatives effectively. Their findings reinforce the competence-based view that EO is only valuable when supported by human and organizational capabilities enabling its execution. Nasution et al. (2024) similarly identified that competencies in opportunity recognition, strategic decision making, and networking mediate the effects of entrepreneurial orientation on SME performance, demonstrating that competence acts as the conduit through which entrepreneurial intent produces business outcomes.

With respect to market orientation, the literature indicates that while MO provides access to valuable market intelligence, the conversion of such intelligence into strategic advantage is not automatic, it depends on the entrepreneur's ability to interpret signals, coordinate responses, and deploy resources appropriately. RBV scholars emphasize that human capital resources such as managerial skills, experience, and knowledge play a significant role in determining how well firms can deploy their strategic capabilities (Man et al., 2002; Wernerfelt, 1984). When entrepreneurs possess strong competencies, they are better equipped to interpret market signals, coordinate business activities, and develop strategies that meet customer needs more effectively, thereby amplifying the performance effect of market orientation.

Similarly, with respect to learning orientation, while LO provides firms with access to new knowledge and information, the ability to effectively utilize that knowledge depends on the competencies of the entrepreneur. Within the RBV framework, entrepreneurial competence represents a valuable human capital resource that enables firms to convert knowledge into productive outcomes. Learning-oriented SMEs may emphasize knowledge acquisition and open-mindedness, but the benefits of such activities can only be fully realized when entrepreneurs possess the skills to translate learning into practical business strategies. RBV scholars argue that knowledge-based resources and managerial capabilities must work together to create competitive advantage (Wernerfelt, 1984; Man et al., 2002).

Based on the aforementioned body of evidence, the following propositions are advanced:

i. Propositions 4: Entrepreneurial competence mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and SME performance in Kaduna State.
ii. Propositions 5: Entrepreneurial competence mediates the relationship between market orientation and SME performance in Kaduna State.

iii. Propositions 6: Entrepreneurial competence mediates the relationship between learning orientation and SME performance in Kaduna State.

Underpinning Theory: Resource-Based View

Among several theoretical frameworks suitable for explaining the link between firm performance and strategic orientations, the Resource-Based View (RBV) provides the most coherent foundation for this paper. Originally proposed by Penrose (1959) and later formalized by Wernerfelt (1984) and Barney (1991), RBV explains how firms achieve sustained competitive advantage by acquiring and deploying resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). The theory emphasizes that performance differences across firms arise not from market position alone but from the effective use of internal resources and capabilities. Barney (2001) classified firm resources into three categories: physical capital, human capital, and organizational capital, encompassing the structures and processes that coordinate people and systems within the firm.

Within this theoretical framework, strategic orientation is viewed as a valuable intangible resource that guides managerial behavior, while entrepreneurial competence represents a dynamic capability that allows firms to mobilize, integrate, and reconfigure these resources to achieve superior performance. This interpretation aligns with Teece's (2018) dynamic capabilities perspective, which extends RBV by emphasizing the firm's ability to sense opportunities, seize them effectively, and transform resources in response to environmental change.

RBV provides a logical explanation for performance variations among enterprises operating in similar environments. SMEs that possess comparable market opportunities often perform differently because those with stronger entrepreneurial competence can better exploit their strategic orientations to generate value. Competence thus serves as the internal mechanism that transforms orientation-based intent into performance-enhancing actions. This study adopts RBV as its central theoretical base because it captures the essence of how internal resources and capabilities, particularly strategic orientation and entrepreneurial competence, jointly determine firm performance, offering a comprehensive explanation of how Nigerian SMEs can achieve sustainable competitive advantage through competence-driven strategic orientation.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical and empirical synthesis presented above, a conceptual framework is proposed to capture the direct and indirect (mediated) relationships between the study constructs. The framework posits that entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, and learning orientation each exert direct positive effects on SME performance. In addition, each strategic orientation influences SME performance indirectly through entrepreneurial competence, which acts as the mediating variable. The framework is therefore structured around six propositions: three capturing direct relationships between each strategic orientation and SME performance, and three capturing the mediating role of entrepreneurial competence in each of these relationships.

Consistent with the Resource-Based View, the framework treats strategic orientations as valuable but latent intangible resources whose performance implications are conditional on the entrepreneur's capacity to operationalize them. Entrepreneurial competence, situated at the individual level, is the mechanism through which orientation-based postures are translated into tangible organizational outcomes. This distinction between organizational-level orientations and individual-level competence is critical to understanding why firms with seemingly similar orientations may achieve markedly different performance results.

The conceptual framework is illustrated as follows:



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
(Anchored on the Resource-Based View — Barney, 1991; Teece, 2018)

As depicted in Figure 1, the framework proposes that the three strategic orientations directly influence SME performance (Propositions 1, 2, and 3). Additionally, the framework proposes that entrepreneurial competence mediates each of these direct relationships (Propositions 4, 5, and 6), consistent with the RBV argument that

internal human capabilities serve as the conduit through which organizational resources and orientations generate performance outcomes.

Discussion of Propositions

The propositions advanced in this paper collectively suggest that strategic orientations are critical drivers of SME success, but that their effectiveness is contingent on the level of entrepreneurial competence possessed by the business owner or manager. The first three propositions, linking entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, and learning orientation to SME performance, are well-supported by the extant literature across multiple national contexts. The RBV provides the theoretical grounding for these relationships by treating each orientation as a valuable, firm-specific intangible resource that generates competitive advantage when effectively deployed.

The entrepreneurial orientation-performance proposition draws support from the consistent finding in empirical studies that firms demonstrating innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking consistently outperform their less entrepreneurially oriented counterparts (Abodunde, 2024; Kiyabo & Isaga, 2020; Hanoum et al., 2025). The market orientation-performance proposition is reinforced by evidence that customer-focused, market-responsive firms achieve superior alignment between their offerings and customer expectations, translating into enhanced profitability and market share (Tessema et al., 2024; Guerra & Camargo, 2024). The learning orientation-performance proposition is supported by studies demonstrating that firms committed to continuous learning and knowledge application are more adaptive and innovative, enabling them to sustain performance even in turbulent environments (Karpacz & Wójcik-Karpacz, 2024; Fatoki, 2024).

The mediating propositions, Propositions 4, 5, and 6, represent the most novel theoretical contribution of this paper. They challenge the prevailing assumption in Nigerian SME research that adopting strategic orientations is sufficient for performance improvement. Instead, they argue that entrepreneurial competence is the enabling mechanism that converts orientation-based intent into realized performance outcomes. This argument is anchored in the RBV argument that firm resources must be effectively managed and deployed to generate sustained competitive advantage. Orientations may exist as organizational postures, but without competent entrepreneurs to interpret market signals, mobilize resources, and implement decisions under uncertainty, such postures may remain latent and unexploited.

The proposition that entrepreneurial competence partially mediates these relationships, rather than fully mediates, is particularly significant. Partial mediation implies that strategic orientations retain a direct performance effect even in the absence of high entrepreneurial competence, but that such effects are meaningfully amplified when competence is present. This nuanced position reflects the complex, layered nature of the orientation-performance relationship and offers a more realistic and actionable insight for SME managers and policymakers.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper developed a conceptual framework examining the effect of entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, and learning orientation on SME performance, with entrepreneurial competence proposed as a mediating variable, anchored on the Resource-Based View. Drawing on a comprehensive synthesis of extant theoretical and empirical literature, the paper advances six propositions suggesting that each of the three strategic orientations has a positive and significant effect on SME performance, and that entrepreneurial competence partially mediates each of these relationships.

The paper concludes that strategic orientations are critical drivers of SME success, but their effectiveness largely depends on the entrepreneur's competence in translating these orientations into actionable strategies. This conclusion contributes to the SME performance literature by bridging the gap between organizational-level strategic postures and individual-level capabilities, providing a more complete explanation of the orientation-performance relationship.

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

i. SME owners and managers should strengthen entrepreneurial orientation within their businesses by consistently seeking new business opportunities, introducing innovative products or services, and adopting strategies that allow them to respond quickly to changes in the business environment.
ii. SME owners and managers should adopt strong market-oriented practices by paying closer attention to customer needs, monitoring competitors' activities, and continuously gathering market information to design products and services that meet customer expectations.
iii. SME owners and managers should promote a culture of continuous learning within their organizations by encouraging knowledge acquisition, training, and the sharing of new ideas, thereby improving adaptability and enhancing overall performance.

iv. Government agencies, training institutions, and business development organizations should provide targeted programmes that enhance the entrepreneurial competencies of SME owners, ensuring that strategic orientations translate into actionable and performance-enhancing decisions.
v. Future empirical studies should test the propositions advanced in this framework using primary data from SMEs in Kaduna State and other Nigerian contexts, employing robust methodologies such as PLS-SEM to validate the mediating role of entrepreneurial competence.

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