



## **The Relationship between Competitive Aggressiveness, Autonomy and SME Performance in Kaduna State.**

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### **Abstract**

*The study examines the relationship between competitive aggressiveness, autonomy and SMEs performance. The study data comprises of SMES operating in Kaduna State North West of Nigeria. The study questionnaires were distributed to key informants of SMEs such as owners and managers through self-administered method. PLS-SEM was used in testing the hypothesis. The result of PLS algorithm shows that competitive aggressiveness and autonomy is significantly related to SMEs performance. For entrepreneurs to have improved performance they should leverage on been competitive aggressive and autonomous in the market place. Similarly, the findings of the study will contribute to the literature and practice of SMEs, policy makers, managing directors, owners and researchers. Finally, limitations and suggestions for further studies were presented.*

**Keywords:** *autonomy, competitive aggressiveness, SME performance, PLS*

### **Introduction**

In several countries, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) constitutes a large portion of the population that are productive and also served as a prime mover (Aremu

& Adeyemi, 2011; Harash, Al-Timimi, & Alsaadi, 2014). Therefore, SMEs plays a significant role as a driver and at the same time, a benchmark with the regards to the

issue of industrialization, modernization and urbanization, meaningful and fruitful employment for our Nigerian teeming unemployed workforce, in order to provide equitable distribution of income, per-capita income, welfare and qualitative life for the whole citizens (Aremu & Adeyemi, 2011). According to Burli, Kotturshettar, and Kalghatgi (2011), SMEs are also capable of providing more economic growth and development as well as progress in terms of opportunities than the large industrial enterprises in the global economy.

Therefore, Small and medium enterprises plays a prominent role globally in the sense that, going by an average in the developed nations, it has contributed 65% of employment rate and 55% to gross domestic product (GDP) (I. M. Aminu & Shariff, 2015; Egena, Wombo, Theresa, & Bridget, 2014). For example, the contribution of SMEs with regards to economic growth and development in the United Kingdom (UK) is 50% of GDP and 54.1% of employment (I. M. Aminu & Shariff, 2015). Similarly, in Taiwan, the contribution stands at 55% to GDP and 70% with regards to employment rate. Nevertheless, in countries like South Korea, the contribution of SMEs stand at 55% to GDP and 70% with regards to the employment level (M. I. Aminu & Mahmood, 2015). Likewise, in South Africa, the contribution of SMEs in relation to employment amounts to 61% and that of GDP is 52-57% respectively (Ndumanya, 2013). Even though Nigeria remains Africa's biggest economy, evidence has shown that business enterprises, including SMEs have been facing challenges, such as entrepreneurial orientation deficiencies and limited capacity for innovations, among others (Aigboduwa & Oisamoje, 2013; Idiara, 2019; Okpara, 2011; Osotimehin, Jegede, Akinlabi, & Olajide, 2012). Therefore, given the aforementioned statistics and issues, it will be pertinent to understand the fundamental factors that is affecting the performance of small and medium enterprises. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between autonomy, competitive aggressiveness and performance of small and medium enterprises in Nigeria. Precisely, SMEs located in North West of Nigeria Kaduna state.

Similarly, the paper will examine resource base theory that indicates a firm's sustainable performance advantage is secured through rare resources of economic value, unique and cannot easily be replicated, imitated or substituted (Barney, 1991). Barney et al. (2011) repeated that RBV of the firm is the foundation upon which competitive advantage and performance can be forecasted. In this scenario, achieving competitive advantage through autonomy

and competitive aggressiveness depends on how well resources are assigned to several activities to address gaps in the market. The importance of RBV is on harnessing resources that are intangible particularly human resources to gain a competitive advantage over rival firms. The study also adds to the body of knowledge in small and medium enterprises by Utilizing RBV theory in explaining how organizational resources and capabilities affects performance; and secondly, how firms that combine autonomy and competitive aggressiveness which are both dimensions of entrepreneur orientation are likely to gain sustained competitive edge and improve performance (Bello, Halim, & Alshuabi, 2018; Boso, Story, & Cadogan, 2013; Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). The research is of paramount importance to Small and medium enterprises because there are so many small and medium enterprises that compete on a daily basis for customers (Bello et al., 2018; Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014).

### **Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

Competitiveness concerns the firm's attitude toward dealing with competitors. It consists of continuously monitoring and countering rivals' strategies (even by imitating other firms) with the aim of achieving a competitive advantage and a better performance (Porter, 1985; Porter & Millar, 1985). The competitive environment requires firms to be alert to the environmental dynamic and respond aggressively to rivals to maintain or attain a competitive position. Competitive aggressiveness is a driver to face the intense competition posed by rivals. Baker and Sinkula (2009) support this argument that a dynamic market environment demands and is defined by aggressive product development, customer support systems and a highly adaptable product process in order to win the market. Miller (2011) and Miller (1983) identified three dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation namely innovation, risk taking and pro-activeness, and emphasized that competitive aggressiveness implies beating competitors to the punch. This implies that SMEs need to compete with the competitive intensity of new entrants into the market. Competitive aggressiveness is the firm's response to competitors in an effort to protect its competitive market position. Drawing from previous studies, this study suggests that competitive aggressiveness may imply a tendency to challenge competitors to achieve entry or improve their competitive position to outperform industry rivals in the marketplace (G Thomas Lumpkin & Dess, 2001; Monsen & Wayne Boss,

2009). In an open market economy like Nigeria where SMEs operate freely and customers are exposed to a wide range of products, tastes and preferences, a competitive aggressive posture might be relevant to protect and attain a competitive market position. This may suggest that competitive aggressiveness is more of a response to rivals' competitive threats than a posture to defend the competitive advantage or secure new competitive advantage over rivals. Competitive advantage has long been associated with a firm's performance. Therefore, the study proposed the following hypothesis:

H<sub>1</sub>: there is a significant positive relationship between competitive aggressiveness and SME performance.

Autonomy deals with the predisposition toward suitable conditions for development and the subsequent implementation of innovative ideas. An organizational culture that promotes new initiatives without hindering individual creativity could be considered autonomous (G Tom Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Regarding the autonomy dimension of EO some studies have been proven that autonomy is positively related organizational performance (Awang et al., 2009) however other researchers did not reveal such results (Casillas, Moreno, & Barbero, 2010; Hughes & Morgan, 2007). The mixed findings of this relationship shows the necessity to improve our knowledge about the relationship that exists between the autonomy and performance link. In other words, the study proposes that:

H<sub>2</sub>: there us a significant relationship between autonomy and performance of SMEs.

### CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Building on the preceding empirical evidences and theoretical perspectives, this study proposed a conceptual model as depicted in Figure 1.

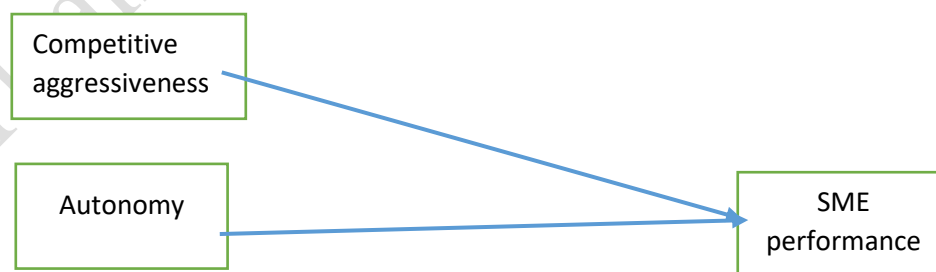


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

## **METHOD**

### **Research design**

This study employed quantitative research approach to assess the relationship between competitive aggressiveness and autonomy and small and medium enterprises performance. Partial Least Squares path modeling (Hellberg, Wold, Dunn III, Gasteiger, & Hatchings, 1985; Wold, Kettaneh-Wold, & Skagerberg, 1989) was employed to test the hypotheses. This study also adopted cross-sectional research design in which data were collected once during the whole study. The data were then analyzed and interpreted statistically, while drawing conclusions or making inferences about the population of the study at one point in time. Cross-sectional research design was adopted over longitudinal research design because of the resource constraints of the researchers in terms of time and money (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). In this study, we also used the survey research method to collect data through self-administered questionnaire. Given that the target population of the study were SMEs operating in north-west of Nigeria kaduna state to be precise. 100 small and medium enterprises managers North West of Nigeria were invited to partake in the study, the unit of analysis in this study was the organization in which the manager of SMEs represented there institution since they are in the best position to state how their firm is faring. In addition, the 100 SMEs in Kaduna State were included in this study using convenience sampling technique.

### **Participants and procedure**

Of the 100 SMEs that participated in the study in Kaduna State in north-western Nigeria; 73 or 73% were owners and 27 or 27% were managers. Seventy six percent of the participants were males and the remaining 24% were their female counterparts. The age of participants ranged between 32 and 55 years old. Nine percent of the participants had been employed by their organization for less than a year, 25% for 1-5 years, 30% for 6-10 years, and 36% for 11 years and above. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to SMEs in Kaduna state through the use of research assistants by the researcher. We selected the participants conveniently from the SMEs operating in Kaduna state. A cover letter accompanied the survey package clearly highlighting the background and purpose of the study. The cover letter also provided instructions on how to answer and return the questionnaire. To further increase the willingness of the participants to partake in the survey, their anonymity and confidentiality were confirmed in the cover letter.

## Measures

The study used the scale of G Tom Lumpkin and Dess (1996) in measuring competitive aggressiveness and autonomy while organizational performance scales was adopted from the study of (Powell, 1995).

## Analytical Approach

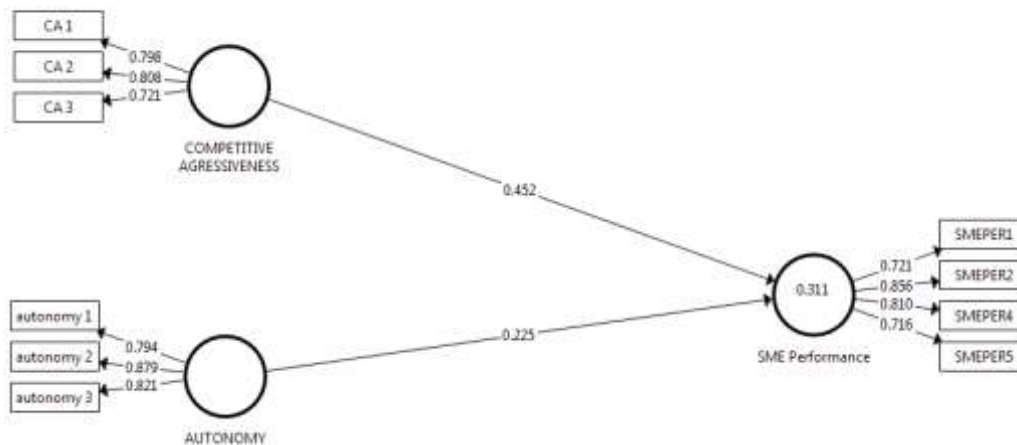
The present study employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The PLS-SEM was employed in this study for the following reasons. First, unlike the traditional regression approach using SPSS Statistics, PLS-SEM can simultaneously estimate the relationships between latent constructs, as well as the relationships between indicators and their corresponding latent constructs (Sarstedt, Ringle, Smith, Reams, & Hair Jr, 2014). Second, PLS-SEM has become a useful tool for researchers to reliably estimate moderating effects with composite variables based on bootstrapping techniques, which employ standard errors for path coefficients (Fassott, Henseler, & Coelho, 2016). Finally, regarding the tool of analysis, Smart PLS 3 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2014) was chosen on the basis of its friendly graphical user interface, which help users to create and estimate a PLS path model easily. Following Anderson and Gerbing (1991) general recommendations, as well as PLS-SEM-specific guidelines, put forward by Henseler, Ringle, and Sinkovics (2009), we first tested the measurement model before considering the structural model. This was followed by bootstrapping the relationship between entrepreneur orientation dimension and SMEs performance.

## RESULTS

### Measurement Model

This study evaluated the measurement's individual item reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, as well as discriminant validity in order to establish the measurement's reliability and validity (J. F. Hair Jr, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2012). The results are presented in Table I. Individual item reliabilities were evaluated by examining the outer loadings of each construct's measure (Hulland, 1999). Following Hair *et al*'s (2013) benchmark for retaining items with loadings between .40 and .70, only 3 of the 13 items were deleted. Hence, in the whole model, the 10 items with loadings between 0.700 and 0.880 were retained.

Second, as the upper bound for the true reliability, internal consistency reliability was examined by means of composite reliability coefficient (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). It is generally recommended that the composite reliability coefficient for each latent construct should exceed 0.70 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).



*Measurement Model: Discriminant Validity (Cross Loadings)*

	AUTONOMY	COMPETITIVE AGRESSIVENESS	SME Performance
<b>CA 1</b>	0.21	0.798	0.452
<b>CA 2</b>	0.279	0.808	0.408
<b>CA 3</b>	0.152	0.721	0.322
<b>SMEPER1</b>	0.263	0.369	0.721
<b>SMEPER2</b>	0.356	0.448	0.856
<b>SMEPER4</b>	0.295	0.368	0.81
<b>SMEPER5</b>	0.159	0.412	0.716
<b>autonomy 1</b>	0.794	0.254	0.274
<b>autonomy 2</b>	0.879	0.214	0.319
<b>autonomy 3</b>	0.821	0.234	0.28

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Extracted (AVE)	Variance
<b>AUTONOMY</b>	0.777	0.785	0.871	0.692	
<b>COMPETITIVE AGRESSIVENESS</b>	0.674	0.687	0.819	0.603	
<b>SME Performance</b>	0.78	0.793	0.859	0.605	

As shown in Table 2, the composite reliability coefficients, which range between 0.819 and 0.871, demonstrate adequate internal consistency reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each latent construct was analyzed to ascertain the convergent validity. Generally, the AVE for each latent construct should exceed 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; J. Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). As shown in Table 2, the AVE for each latent construct has exceeded the threshold value of 0.50, hence, suggesting a satisfactory convergent validity. Finally, Fornell-Larcker's criterium was used to ascertain the discriminant validity of the measures. The results can be seen in Table 2. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity is established only if the AVE for each latent construct is statistically significant and exceeds its squared correlation with any other construct. In Table 3 and 4, the squared correlations among the latent constructs were compared with the square root of the AVEs (values in bold face). Table 3 and 4 suggests that there is adequate discriminant validity as the AVE for each latent construct exceeded its squared correlation with any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Besides using the Fornell and Larcker criterion, we also confirmed discriminant validity by using the heterotraitmonotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) approach. This approach, which was recommended by Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015), is based on a multitrait-multimethod matrix. The discriminant validity is said to be adequate when HTMT values are below the threshold of less than 0.90 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). The results in Table 2 and 3 showed that none of the HTMT values was larger than 0.90, which suggest that our measurement model fits the data well and it is also indication of adequate discriminant validity.

Table 2 and 3: Results of Discriminant Validity of Measures

**Fornell-Larcker criterion**

	<b>AUTONOMY</b>	<b>COMPETITIVE AGRESSIVENESS</b>	<b>SME Performance</b>
<b>AUTONOMY</b>	0.832		
<b>COMPETITIVE AGRESSIVENESS</b>	0.28	0.776	
<b>SME Performance</b>	0.351	0.515	0.778



**Table 3: HTMT<.90 Criterion**

	AUTONOMY	COMPETITIVE AGGRESSIVENESS	SME Performance
<b>AUTONOMY</b>			
<b>COMPETITIVE AGGRESSIVENESS</b>	0.382		
<b>SME Performance</b>	0.442	0.698	

**Structural Model**

Having ascertained the reliability and validity of the measurement model, we then evaluated the structural model. Based on the assessment criteria recommended by Henseler et al. (2012), as well as Hair et al. (2013), four metrics were used to judge the structural model, namely the significance of path coefficients, coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), effect sizes ( $f^2$ ), and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ). As mentioned earlier, we followed the procedures for estimating with composite variables based on bootstrapping techniques, which were suggested by Fassott et al. (2016). The results of the full structural model are presented in Figure 2 and Table 4.

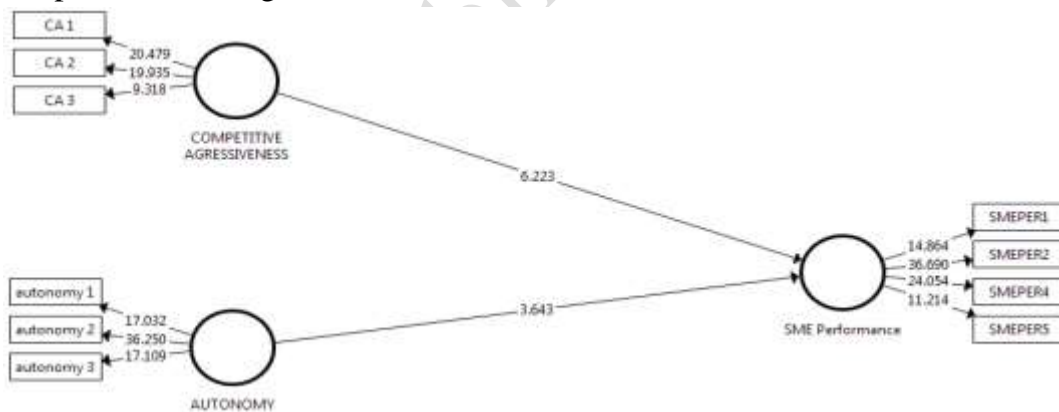


Figure 2

Table 4: Results of Full Structural Model

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics ( O/STDEV )	P Values
<b>AUTONOMY -&gt; SME Performance</b>	0.225	0.062	3.643	0
<b>COMPETITIVE AGGRESSIVENESS -&gt; SME Performance</b>	0.452	0.073	6.223	0

### Assessment of Coefficient of Determination

The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of the model demonstrates that the percentage of explained variance for the SME performance was 0.311. This suggests that competitive aggressiveness and autonomy explained 31.1% variance for the SMEs performance, which is considered small in the present study.

Additionally, a research model with higher positive  $Q^2$  value suggests more predictive relevance. Table 4 presents the results of the cross-validated redundancy  $Q^2$  test. As shown in Table 5, the cross-validation redundancy measure  $Q^2$  for the endogenous latent variable was above zero, suggesting satisfactory predictive relevance of the model (Hair et al., 2013; Henseler et al., 2012).

The Table above represents the *blindfolding* result of the cross-validated redundancy ( $Q^2$ ) of the latent endogenous variable of the direct relationships model of this study. As this cross-validated redundancy ( $Q^2$ ) is greater than zero, it clearly indicates the presence of path model predictive relevance (Chin, 1998; J. F. Hair Jr et al., 2014).

	SSO	SSE	$Q^2$ (=1-SSE/SSO)
<b>AUTONOMY</b>	900	900	
<b>COMPETITIVE</b>	900	900	
<b>AGRESSIVENESS</b>			
<b>SME Performance</b>	1,200.0	995.56	0.17
	0	3	

### DISCUSSION

Two of the hypothesis were supported by the PLS-SEM path modeling results. In other words, the statistical analysis revealed that competitive aggressiveness and autonomy were found to exert influence on the performance of SMEs in Nigeria. These findings are consisted and as well supported by the resource-based theory under which such relationships were postulated. According to this perspective, for a firm to have superior performance, it must control intangible valuable, rareness, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources, to be used in implementing strategy that is not simultaneously being implemented by current or potential competitors (J. Barney, 1991; J. B. Barney, 1986). Lonial and Carter

(2015) argued that competitive aggressiveness and autonomy dimension of EO is one of those intangible assets that are specifically difficult to be duplicated by competitors, and thus it is a source of firm superior performance. Moreover, according to Meutia (2013), the RBV asserts that entrepreneurial competence as intangible assets exerts influence in building SME performance.

The significant positive relationships between competitive aggressiveness and autonomy are also consistent with the previous studies results (M. I. Aminu & Mahmood, 2015; Baba & Elumalai, 2011; Hughes & Morgan, 2007; Ranasinghe, Yajid, Khatibi, & Azam, 2018) which they have also found that all the three dimensions have positive influence on performance. To this end, it is evidently enough to establish that it is both theoretically and empirically supported that competitive aggressiveness and autonomy exact influence SMEs performance operating in Kaduna state.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Despite the enormous contribution given by this study in theoretical, practical, as well as methodological aspects, as in many investigative studies, several limitations must be taken into cognizance. However, such limitations may also offer avenues for future research. Specifically, one of the major limitations of the present study concerns with its cross-sectional nature in which data were collected over a single period of time from SMEs operating in Kaduna state, North-west of Nigeria. As such, caution should be exercised when drawing causal inferences. Consequently, future study may address this constraint by conducting longitudinal study that collects data over two or more points of time, so as to compare and contrast with the present study's findings and be able to draw cause-effect interference appropriately. Similarly studies should also consider the five dimensions of EO. Future studies can also add other variables to the conceptual framework such as TQM and service marketing mix.

### **Conclusions**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the relationships between competitive aggressiveness and autonomy on performance of SMEs in Kaduna state North west of Nigeria. The empirical findings supported the 2 hypotheses developed; thereby answering all the research questions despite some identified limitations, and also supported the key theoretical positions upon which the present study has been drawn. In addition, the research findings are consistent

with a number of previous empirical studies conducted in the domain of current research underpinning theories. Moreover, the research findings also go a long way in lending a strategic model of how Nigerian SMEs can improve their performance, and also can serve as a blueprint as well as macroeconomics objectives and policies for SMEs. Finally, the study concluded with some limitations that are the avenues for future research directions.

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