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ENTREPRENEURIAL ORIENTATION, DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY AND SUSTAINABLE SMES PERFORMANCE IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study examines the mediating effect of differentiation strategy on the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation dimensions and sustainable Small and Medium Enterprises performance. The population of the study is six thousand and twelve (n=6,012). SMEs operating in Northeast States of Nigeria out of which three hundred and eighty-four (n=364) were selected using Yamane formula and data were collected from (retrieved 325 copies). Regarding specific indirect effects, innovativeness risk-taking and competitive aggressiveness have demonstrated significant positive indirect effects on sustainable SMEs performance via differentiation strategy. Conversely, autonomy and proactiveness failed to demonstrate significant indirect effects, a negative effect of autonomy on SME performance, pointing that it can be a source of liability where SMEs lack strategy framework that may not yield a competitive advantage in the SMEs context.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial orientation, differentiation, strategy, sustainability, SMEs

1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) has been assessed as a significant antecedent of business performance (Osei & Zhuang, 2024). Practically, a firm's ability to innovate means that the firm can create and develop new products or develop new services to achieve high growth performance. Strategically, firms that adopt new technology and explore new opportunities with unknown outcomes can take risky investments, leading to high performance. Moreover, proactiveness means that firms can identify new demands, products, and opportunities ahead of the competitors to maintain their competitive advantage. Previous scholars conclude that Entrepreneurial Orientation has a robust positive relationship with the performance of firms (Osei & Zhuang, 2024).

The determination of the dimensions seems to be based mostly on the country and the situation of SMEs in the country (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021). However, many scholars have pointed that EO has five-dimensional constructs that support the success of the entrepreneurial process: risk-taking, innovativeness, proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy (Yuza et al., 2023). In the words of Sari et al., (2022) the behaviors that describe entrepreneurial orientation

are the key five dimensions to entrepreneurial orientation these are innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, autonomy and competitive aggressiveness Although entrepreneurial orientation influence performance (Al-Shami et al., 2022), still several factors may influence performance, especially in the dynamic technological environment. This notion was ignored by most past studies since the majority focused on the direct relationship rather than exploring other factors that consolidate this relationship (Al-Shami et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation, differentiation strategy and sustainable SMEs performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Innovativeness and Sustainable SMEs Performance

Several findings were reported by different scholars, however, according to Udum and Emmanuel, (2022) there exists a significant positive relationship between innovativeness and business performance. Omisakin et al., (2016) and Kosa et al (2018) suggest that without innovativeness, organizations cannot operate and performance efficiently. Innovativeness is a crucial part of business survival strategies. Some research has found a positive link between innovation and business performance (Rauch et al., 2009). As such, the importance of innovation as a contributing variable to the measurement of entrepreneurial orientation and business performance is indisputable (Barazandeh et al., 2015; Omisakin et al., 2016). Despite studies establishing significant positive relationship between innovativeness and performance, a study by Ahmed, (2019), found negative impact on the success of business. Therefore, also reported innovativeness tends to reduce performance of business (Zulfiqar et al., 2019).

Innovativeness has been broadly accepted in literature, as a dimension of entrepreneurial orientation, is critical to driving improved performance and that a number of different factors stimulate innovation in the organization. Arshad et al. (2014) assessed technology-based SMEs in Malaysia and found innovation to be significant on business performance in SMEs. Similarly, Kocak et al.. (2017) study on selected SMEs in Turkey assessed the effects of market, entrepreneurial and technology orientation on performance, finding reveal that innovation has a significant influence on SMEs' performance in Turkey. The study focused on the consequence of EO practices on innovation and firm performance and found them to be significant. White and Vila (2017) studied the effect of EO on marketing strategies among US firms entering Cuba. The focus was on the entrepreneurial intensity of selected firms entering a newly liberalized market such as Cuba. New product development, as a measure of entrepreneurial orientation.

Study indicated that for a firm to make a successful entry into a new market, there must be some level of innovation or new product development (Isichei et al., 2020). According to Nikoomaram and Ma'atoofi (2011), the unique quality from the innovative process would guarantee better business performance, subsequently the firm's capability to attract new customers and additionally keep up its existing clients (Li et al., 2009).

Innovative and agile ventures that can effectively target new objectives, such as sustainability impacts, by integrating environmental and social measures into their core economic business models and by adopting new operational paradigms (Von Kolpinski et al., 2024). This will make the performance of SMEs increase and also the marketing of SMEs will run well because consumers will be attracted by product innovations made by SMEs. (Permatasari & Praswati, 2024). This hypothesis is formed based on research results from Widyaningsih et al. (2018) which found that innovation can mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and performance.

Many studies have been conducted to find out the relationship between innovativeness and firm performance. Research conducted by Nugraha (2019) shows a positive influence between innovation on performance, and some of them found that innovativeness had no correlation with firm performance (Gautam, 2016). Research conducted by Siti, (2018) shows a negative influence between innovation on performance. Some scholars disagree with above views that innovativeness had no relationship with firm performance. Numerous studies have concluded that innovativeness had significant positive correlation with firm performance (Zulfiqar et al., 2019). However, A research results from Klongthong et al. (2020) found that innovation has a positive and significant effect on performance This is the basis for researchers to conduct this research (Permatasari & Praswati, 2024).

H1: innovativeness via differentiation strategy influences sustainable SMEs performance.

2.2 Proactiveness and Performance

Studies on the connection between EO and business performance have found a positive relationship between proactiveness and performance (Lumpkin and Dess 2001; Hughes and Morgan 2007; Rauch et al., 2009; Kosa et al., 2018). The dimensions of business proactive behavior include creating the customers' loyalty, identifying and creating additional innovative activities, creating constant communication, and establishing supply chain to firm's product, marketing strategies when implemented will lead to high business performance (Wisner 2004). Business proactive orientation behavior depends on close relations with internal marketing and sales resources, processes, and skills. Supply management and customer relationship strategy, which are consistent with proactive orientation, have a positive effect on business performance (Mentzer et al., (2008; Chenuos & Maru 2015; Udum & Emmanuel, (2022). However, a study by George & Elrashid, (2020) revealed proactiveness has no significant association with the business performance. Therefore, the hypothesis proposes a there is no positive significant relationship between proactiveness and business performance.

Proactiveness and performance Consumers' changing tastes and demands require extreme proactiveness in firms (Isichei et al., 2020). Gunawan et al. (2016) found proactiveness to significantly influence performance. Similarly, Lumpkin and Dess (1996) found a significant

influence of proactiveness on performance. Karacaoglu et al. (2013), meanwhile, found proactiveness to be significant in influencing financial performance. The extent to which a firm is able to take advantage of the knowledge of future needs, and provide for them, could be vital in driving improved performance, despite uncertainties in predicting changes in consumers' taste and demands at any given time. Despite a small number of studies indicating a weak influence of proactiveness on performance (e.g. Bell et al., 2003 (Isichei et al., 2020). Previous literature suggested that proactiveness has a significant positive impact over firm performance (Maldonado-Guzman et al.,2017; Haider et al., 2017; Mojikon et al., 2016; Gautam, 2016; Belgacem, 2015; Mason et al.,2015; Dzulkarnain et al., 2014; Fairoz et al.,2010; Hughes and Morgan, 2007; Zulfiqar et al., 2019).

H2: proactiveness via differentiation strategy influences sustainable SMEs performance.

2.3 Risk-taking and Sustainable SMEs Performance

Risk taking involves taking bold actions by venturing into the unknown, borrowing heavily and/or committing significant resources to ventures in uncertain environments with the prime objective of success (Udum & Emmanuel, 2022). The theory of risk-taking is associated with good business performance Chenuos & Maru (2015). According to Kosa et al., (2018), risk-taking will contribute to the performance of ventures.

The extent of risk that firms are ready to take when an opportunity is identified has its roots in the determination of the firm success (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Okoli et al., 2021). Risk-taking, among SMEs' managers, may be a challenge, as they often lack the right capacity and resources to get qualitative information that will aid decision-making (Agu et al., 2018; Majumder & Mahapatra, 2021). Rosemond et al. (2012) found risk-taking to be weak and not significant in relation to performance among artisans in Ghana. Similarly, Kallmuenzer and Peters (2018) and found that risk-taking did not have a significantly strong influence on performance. Conversely, Al-Swidi and Al- Hosam (2012) found risk-taking to be significant in relation to performance. Similarly, Mwaura et al. (2015) showed risk-taking has a significant influence on performance. These findings indicate that risk-taking contributes to improved performance (Isichei et al., 2020).

According to Naparin, (2024), risk-taking includes decision-making process, which is planned and taken into consideration by the firm. Risk taking propensity plays significant role in maintaining market share of a firm and/or seeking aggressive growth in the business (Kreiser, et al., 2002; Zulfiqar et al., 2019). According to Covin et al. (2006), the risk-taking element would be beneficial for the targets of improved firm performance and profit acquisition. Many scholars have investigated the effect of risk-taking propensity on firm performance and some of them found that risk-taking propensity had significant negative correlation with firm performance (Hughes and Morgan, 2007) and others concluded that risk-taking propensity had no correlation

with firm performance (Dzulkarnain et al.,2014). While a few others have acknowledged that risk-taking propensity had a significant positive impact over the firm performance (Zulfiqar et al., 2019).

A versatile combination of entrepreneurial attributes is necessary for an SMEs to launch and manage a firm confronted with risk and uncertainty (Khodor et al., 2024). According to Ketchen and Craighead (2020), some skills alter the correlation between risk-taking and performance. According to Ramadani et al. (2019) one of these capabilities is the ability to adapt to new situations by coming up with new ideas and rearranging old ones. Covin et al. (2020) state that entrepreneurs must be risk-takers who can deal with uncertainty. The development of business opportunities motivates business managers: strategic management and resource allocation require high adaptability, especially when entrepreneurial risk taking is at play (Khodor et al., 2024).

According to Boldureanu et al. (2020), entrepreneurs who are uncomfortable taking risks struggle to gage customer interest, obtain funding, and entice investors. In response to changing circumstances, these professionals may reorganize their business assets, making them more resilient and flexible (Khodor et al., 2024).

H3: risk taking via differentiation strategy influences sustainable SMEs performance.

2.4 Autonomy and Sustainable SMEs performance

Autonomy and freedom in the organization encourages the firm to prosper and construct new ideas into operation that would enhance business performance and thus bring more profit to the business. Thus, the higher their autonomous attitude, the more successful owner or managers in holding their control and space to enhance operational performance (Ardhi & Mulyo, 2021). Autonomy empowers and encourage owners/managers leave their comfortable positions to seek ideas and initiatives for performance improvement. Furthermore, autonomous attitude is also reflected by providing freedom and opportunities for employees to contribute, improve service quality (Zulfiqar et al., 2019; Ardhi & Mulyo, 2021). That can succeed in achieving an attitude of loyalty and encouraging the entrepreneurial spirit of employees. Thus, the practice of autonomy shown individually and collectively is able to have an impact on improving business performance. (Ardhi & Mulyo, 2021).

Business performance is dependent upon the generation of new ideas produced self-regulated and mind workers that cultivate into performance increase (Ibrahim et at., 2023). This means that the functions of the owner/manager and employees are to be autonomous and needed in leading the firm to improve business performance (Ardhi & Mulyo, 2021). Several scholars have conducted studies to find out the relationship between autonomy dimension of entrepreneurial orientation and business performance and some of the studies found that autonomy had positive

correlation with business performance, (Hughes and Morgan, 2007; Zulfiqar et al., 2019; Udum & Emmanuel, 2022). While some of the literature proved autonomy has no relationship with business performance.

The ideas put forward by the staff with support of management, would enhance performance of firm and thus bring more profit to the organization. The entrepreneurial firm performance is dependent upon the accomplishment of new ideas spawned through the autonomy required by the workers, which subsequently empowers the new ideas to become a reality (Zulfiqar et al., 2019).

H4: autonomy via differentiation strategy influences sustainable SMEs performance.

2.5 Competitive Aggressiveness and Sustainable SMEs Performance

The dimensions of competitive aggressiveness have a significant effect on business performance Competitive aggressiveness reflects how to engage with competitors, dare to enter the market, and realize strategies faster than competitors (Ardhi & Mulyo, 2021). To sustain performance in sales growth and superior performance business requires aggressive responses to competitive opportunities and threats, without which, the firm will be pace out of the business. (Udum & Emmanuel, 2022).

This is a kind of reaction to the moves of the competitor so that efforts such as the creation of new products, promotions, or equipping facilities and attracting customer interest and maintaining market segment with competitive edge. Thus, the effort to be more competitive and aggressive is able to managers improve business performance (Ardhi & Mulyo, 2021). Competitive aggressiveness as a response of business to achieve competitive advantage in the marketplace (Diaz & Sensini, 2020). Competitive aggressiveness seeks out to preserve and grow existing resources in response to competitive threats emanating from the industry. Thus, competitive aggressiveness may involve actions such as concentrating on preserving market positions or overtake rivals in markets deemed valuable of Abdalla & Mohamed, 2020).

Competitive aggressiveness assesses competitor actions above environmental assessment so that opportunities to exploit the strengths and competitors' weaknesses are sought and taken advantage of by proactively responding to opportunities and threats (Diaz & Sensini, 2020). Several Scholars arrived at the conclusion that competitive aggressiveness had significant positive correlation with firm performance (Zulfiqar et al., 2019; Abdalla & Mohamed 2020; Majumder & Mahapatra, 2021; Al-Najjar et al., 2024).

H5: competitive aggressiveness via differentiation strategy influences sustainable SMEs performance.

2.6 Differentiation Strategy as a mediator

There are prior studies in the literature on mediating role of differentiation strategy (Zulfiqar et al., 2019; Pradipta et al., 2023; Omar, 2024). Accordingly, scholars suggested to look for inner and outer components that mediate the connection amongst entrepreneurial orientation and SMEs performance, as well as of measuring the immediate link between them (Zulfiqar et al., 2019). Therefore, in this study, efforts are made to explore mediating effect of differentiation strategy on the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. Zehir et al. (2015) suggested that differentiation strategy mediated the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. Likewise, it was argued that differentiation strategy will enhance entrepreneurial orientation and performance relationship. Also, findings suggest that differentiation strategy partially mediated the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance (Zulfiqar et al., 2019).

The mediating role of differentiation strategy on sustainable SMEs performance and the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation, and sustainable SMEs performance have important implications for understanding and modelling SMEs sustainable performance. Teece (2018) suggest that a firm's capability determine the business model a firm chooses, suggesting an effect differentiation strategy. Moreover, within this framework, the SMEs are supposed to change strategy in order to capture the value created by differentiation strategy and transform it into a competitive advantage that enhance SMEs sustainable performance (Gerdoçi et al., 2023). However, most of the previous studies address entrepreneurial orientation as unidimensional construct approach without theorizing and empirical analysis of the effects of each dimension. Thus, addressing these gaps, the study examines how differentiation strategy mediates the entrepreneurial orientation sustainable SMEs performance by conceptualizing the framework.

H6: Differentiation strategy mediates entrepreneurial orientation dimensions and sustainable SMEs performance.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research study employed cross sectional design through primary method of data collection, and survey method in terms of data collection criteria. A questionnaires were distributed to collect primary data, questionnaire were chosen because they are faster for respondents to respond, easier to administer, easier to analyze, and guarantee respondents' confidentially. The Likert scale was used in the study to create questions based on the investigation's goals. Questionnaires were distributed to SMEs owners/managers who possessed sufficient information. The researchers carefully selected all qualified SMEs after conducting a detailed and comprehensive study of the statistical population. The population of the study is six thousand and twelve (n=6,012). SMEs operating in Northeast States of Nigeria out of which three hundred and eighty-four (n=364) were selected using Yamane formula and data were collected from (retrieved 325 copies). The research questionnaire was then provided to the

selected respondents and the data collected was analyzed using SmartPls4 Software.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

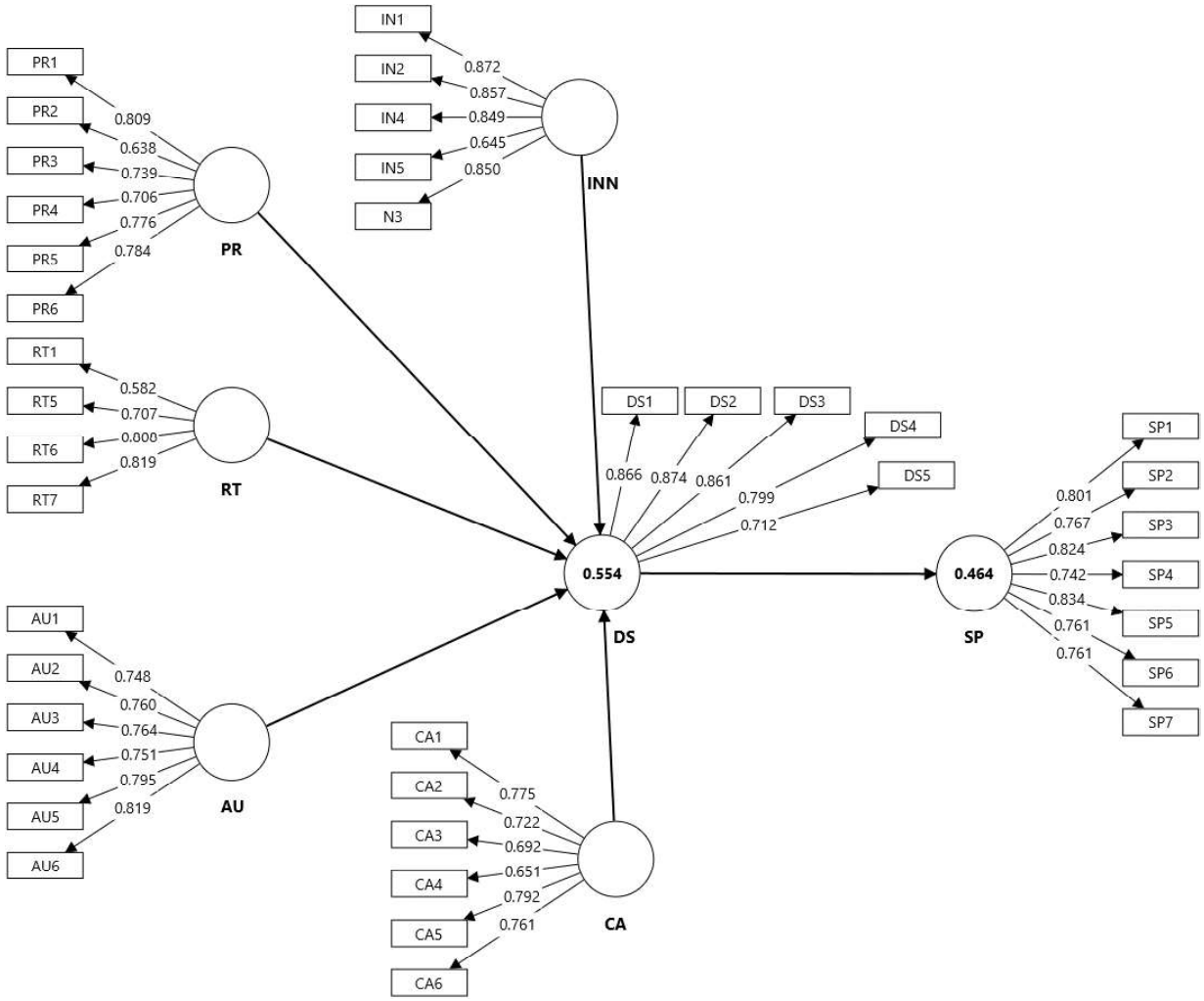

Table 1: Construct Reliability and Validity

Items	Loadings	α	CR	AVE	Items	Loadings	α	CR	AVE
AU1	0.748	0.865	0.866	0.598	PR1	0.809	0.839	0.866	0.554
AU2	0.760				PR2	0.638			
AU3	0.764				PR3	0.739			
AU4	0.751				PR4	0.706			
AU5	0.795				PR5	0.776			
AU6	0.819				PR6	0.784			
CA1	0.775	0.827	0.829	0.538	RT1	0.582	0.726	0.776	0.540
CA2	0.722				RT2	0.707			
CA3	0.692				RT3	0.808			
CA4	0.651				RT4	0.819			
CA5	0.792				SP1	0.801	0.897	0.906	0.616
CA6	0.761				SP2	0.767			
DS1	0.866	0.881	0.891	0.680	SP3	0.824			
DS2	0.874				SP4	0.742			
DS3	0.861				SP5	0.834			
DS4	0.799				SP6	0.761			
DS5	0.712				SP7	0.761			
IN1	0.872	0.875	0.895	0.671					
IN2	0.857								
IN3	0.849								
IN4	0.645								
IN5	0.850								

The measurement model assessment confirms the reliability and validity of all the variables. Composite reliability ranged between 0.776 to 0.906 values, above the threshold of 0.70, confirming acceptable internal consistency. Also, convergent validity was established as the average variance extracted (AVE) of above 0.50 values were obtained, all item loadings were within the acceptable range, thus, the constructs are fit for structural model testing.

Discriminant Validity

Table 2: Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) - Matrix

Constructs	AU	CA	DS	INN	PR	RT
AU						
CA	0.669					
DS	0.598	0.801				
INN	0.668	0.590	0.611			
PR	0.569	0.392	0.371	0.759		
RT	0.591	0.575	0.574	0.449	0.472	
SP	0.506	0.839	0.743	0.574	0.377	0.484

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. As shown in Table 2 above, all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85 recommended by (Henseler et al., 2015), confirming that each construct is empirically distinct from other constructs. Discriminant validity is established; this suggests a divergent theoretical proximity between the constructs.

Table 3: Model fits

Fit Indices	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.066	0.080
d_ULS	3.447	4.942
d_G	1.089	1.147
Chi-square	3080.697	3201.417
NFI	0.759	0.750

The model demonstrates acceptable approximate fit based on the SRMR criterion. However, the NFI suggests the model does not fit the data as well as a null (independence) model. In PLS-SEM research, this is common and often accepted provided the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is below 0.08. A value of < 0.08 is considered a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). A value of < 0.10 is considered acceptable in many exploratory or social science contexts (Hair et al., 2022). This indicates that the discrepancy between data and the theoretical model is slight and satisfactory.

Table 4: Path coefficients

Paths	β	T statistics	P values	Decisions	Verdicts
PR -> DS -> SP	-0.062	1.749	0.080	Not supported	No Mediation
INN -> DS -> SP	0.172	3.257	0.001	Supported	Full Mediation
RT -> DS -> SP	0.124	3.061	0.002	Supported	Full Mediation
AU -> DS -> SP	0.047	1.200	0.230	Not supported	No Mediation
CA -> DS -> SP	0.317	6.390	0.000	Supported	Full Mediation
DS -> SP	0.681	19.724	0.000	Supported	Supported

The analysis of structural model results reveal the mediating role of differentiation strategy in the relationship between some dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation and sustainable SMEs performance. Regarding specific indirect effects, innovativeness ($\beta = 0.172$, $p = 0.001$), and risk-taking ($\beta = 0.124$, $p = 0.002$). Competitive aggressiveness ($\beta = 0.317$, $p < 0.000$), have demonstrated significant positive indirect effects on sustainable SMEs performance via differentiation strategy. Conversely, autonomy ($\beta = 0.047$, $p = 0.230$) and Proactiveness ($\beta = -0.062$, $p = 0.080$) failed to demonstrate significant indirect effects. The direct effect of differentiation strategy on sustainable SMEs performance was also positive and significant ($\beta = 0.681$, $p < 0.001$) as shown in Table 4 above. Thus, the findings suggest that while not all dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation contribute on equal proportion and direction, the development of a differentiation strategy is the crucial mediator through which competitive aggressiveness, innovativeness, and risk-taking behaviors transform into sustainable performance for SMEs.

Table 5: R-square

Criterion variables	R-square	R-square adjusted
DS	0.554	0.550
SP	0.464	0.463

The structural model demonstrated acceptable explanatory power. The coefficient of determination (R^2) for differentiation strategy was 0.554, indicating that the five entrepreneurial orientation dimensions collectively explain 55.4% of the variance in the model. For sustainable performance, the R^2 was 0.464, confirming that the model accounts for a substantial portion of variance in sustainable performance.

Table 6: f-square

Constructs	Effect sizes
AU	0.006
CA	0.282
DS	0.864
INN	0.068
PR	0.011
RT	0.050

Among the EO dimensions, competitive aggressiveness demonstrated a moderate effect size (f^2 = 0.282). Innovativeness (f^2 = 0.068) and risk-taking (f^2 = 0.050) report small effects, while proactiveness (f^2 = 0.011) and autonomy (f^2 = 0.006) contributed weak effect sizes. These findings reinforce the path analysis results and confirm that differentiation strategy, driven primarily by competitive aggressiveness, is the key conduit through which EO that lead to sustainable SME performance. Effect size (f^2) analysis revealed that differentiation strategy has a large effect on sustainable performance (f^2 = 0.864), emphasizing its mediating role strength.

Innovativeness & Risk-Taking findings is similar to finings of Kim & Yi (2025), these dimensions influence differentiation strategy and performance. Zaato (2022) reported similar finding competitive aggressiveness is significant on performance SMEs. Ahmad et al., (2024) found a negative effect of autonomy on SME performance, pointing that it can be a source of liability where SMEs lack strategy framework that may not yield a competitive advantage in the SMEs context. A study by Kaushal et al., (2022) also confirms differentiation strategy as a key mediator.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that entrepreneurial orientation not enhance sustainable SMEs performance through the mediation of differentiation strategy as a gestalt influence, but confirmed the mediating effect of the differentiation strategy in the relationship. It also revealed that differentiation strategy mediates the relationship between the dimensions of OE (innovativeness, risk taking and competitive aggressiveness) and sustainable SMEs performance while proactiveness and autonomy dimensions show no mediation effect. Thus, entrepreneurial orientation alone is insufficient to increase the competitiveness and performance of SMEs, The competitiveness and performance of SMEs are directly and positively influenced by their differentiation strategy, thus, it is a critical intervening variable for fostering sustainable SMEs performance and developing strategic competitiveness edge for managers.

Manager have to understand that relying on autonomy and proactiveness without strategy would not yield performance, thus, entrepreneurial orientation merged with differentiation strategy, focus on unique product/services provide competitive edge and drive performance. The study contributes and advances empirical support for strategic and resource based view theory by how tangible and intangible resources can be transformed into competitive advantage. It also reveals that not dimensions' influence differentiation but specific dimensions' act as mediating variables to performance that indicates the multi dimensionality of the entrepreneurial orientation construct over gestalt effect.

This study is not without limitations, therefore, future study should investigate SMEs through

longitudinal design to assess how this relationship hold in a long term. Secondly, similar study can be conduct regions and other variables like cost leadership and digital adaptation as mediating variables.

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