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The Determinants of Overseas Sales Expansion of African Food Products and Its Implications for SME Growth in Nigeria

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Abstract- Growing global demand for African food products has not translated into sustained overseas sales of many Nigerian SMEs. The study focuses on the determinants of overseas sales expansion of African food products and Nigerian SME growth. A mixed-methods design was adopted. The sample size was 584 for export-oriented SMEs selected through multi-stage sampling techniques; complemented by key-informant interviews in the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, which served as strata, with proportionate allocation across the zones and simple random respondents. Results revealed that product quality and certification compliance, and access to export finance were the most significant determinants of overseas sales expansion ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, overseas sales expansion showed a positive and significant relationship with SME growth indicators, including revenue, employment, and technological upgrading. The study concludes that while global demand presents opportunities, Nigerian SMEs require targeted support to overcome structural and institutional barriers. The study recommended that government and trade agencies should strengthen export certification and standards compliance support for SMEs; financial institutions and policymakers should design tailored export finance and risk-mitigation instruments; and stakeholders should invest in cold-chain logistics, digital commerce platforms, and diaspora market linkages to enhance SME competitiveness.

Keywords- African food products; overseas sales expansion; SME growth; Nigeria; internationalization

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I. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) occupy a central position in Nigeria's economic architecture, contributing about 48% of national GDP and providing approximately 63 million jobs. Despite this domestic significance, Nigeria's MSMEs account for only 6.21% of total exports, a figure that compares poorly with peers such as India (49.35%) and China (68%). Global demand for African food products continues to rise, particularly among diaspora communities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, as well as through digital marketplaces such as Etsy, eBay, and Amazon, where African foods are attracting increasing patronage. Yet Nigerian SMEs have struggled to translate this demand into sustained overseas sales.

The internationalization behavior of Nigerian SMEs has attracted growing scholarly attention. Eziashi and Abamu (2023) found that profit and growth motives, foreign market opportunities, and unsolicited foreign orders are key drivers of SME internationalization, concluding that going abroad helps firms remain competitive and achieve long-term growth. Karage et al. (2021) demonstrated that export promotion programmes strengthen the effects of innovativeness and risk-taking on internationalization, underscoring the supportive role of institutions in building managerial capacity. Daboh and Orisaremi (2022) established that both market and organizational innovation exert significant positive effects on SMEs' international business performance, however, identified substantial barriers to export development and financing, qualified export planning personnel, foreign competition, inadequate government assistance and export knowledge gaps.

These constraints are acute in the African food products segment. NAFDAC and SON have repeatedly intervened to address the rejection of Nigerian food exports by US and EU markets, citing contaminants such as pesticide residues and inadequate packaging and labelling. The Standards Organization of Nigeria (SON) has fresh standards to combat the high level of rejection faced by Nigeria's agricultural commodities in global markets. Beyond certification and compliance challenges, logistics infrastructure remains a critical bottleneck: poor transport and storage facilities account for significant post-harvest losses, and the lack of cold-chain logistics reduces

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Nigeria's trade capacity. Access to export finance is another persistent constraint, with the 2021 SMEDAN report indicating that 92.4% of surveyed businesses identified lack of finance as the biggest challenge to enterprise development. Recognizing this gap, the Nigerian Export-Import Bank (NEXIM) has launched various facilities, including a ₦36 billion Export Development Fund and a ₦10 billion Women and Youth Export Facility, to support export-oriented SMEs.

Digital transformation and diaspora engagement are emerging as promising pathways. The Nigerian digital diaspora increasingly supports SME growth through remittances, digital mentorship, market access facilitation, and online advocacy, with statistically significant positive relationships observed between digital diaspora involvement and SME revenue and innovation performance. E-commerce platforms are providing MSMEs with wider market access and transforming traditional retail operations for international expansion. However, challenges such as trust deficits, poor digital infrastructure, and uneven digital literacy among SMEs constrain sustained engagement.

Empirical investigations by Nigerian scholars have progressively illuminated the drivers and obstacles shaping SME internationalization, though substantial gaps persist. Eziashi and Abamu (2023) empirically investigated the motivations behind Nigerian SME internationalization using a convergent parallel design, analyzing 181 questionnaires and 10 semi-structured interviews. Their findings revealed that profit and growth, foreign market opportunities, and unsolicited foreign orders constitute the principal motives for going abroad, with internationalization enhancing firm competitiveness and long-term survival. However, the study did not disaggregate by product category, leaving the specific dynamics of food product exports unexplored. Karage et al. (2021) demonstrated that export promotion programmes strengthen the relationship between international entrepreneurial orientation and internationalization, while Daboh and Orisaremi (2022) established that both market and organizational innovation exert significant positive effects on SMEs' international business performance. These studies, however, focused on broad internationalization outcomes rather than the determinants of sales expansion in specific product segments.

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Despite these contributions, critical gaps persist. Existing Nigerian empirical studies treat SMEs as an undifferentiated category, failing to account for the distinct certification, packaging, traceability, and cold-chain requirements that characterize African food products, institutional quality, innovation, finance, and logistics have each been examined in isolation, no study has integrated firm-level, product-level, and institutional determinants within a unified analytical framework focused on overseas sales expansion, the majority of studies employ samples concentrated in specific sectors or regions, limiting generalizability to the geographically dispersed food product SME sector and the relationship between overseas sales expansion and multidimensional SME growth outcomes; revenue, employment, and technological upgrading remains insufficiently empirically tested in the Nigerian food export context. This study addresses these gaps by examining the determinants of overseas sales expansion of African food products and its implications for SME growth in Nigeria.

Objective of the Study

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Examine the effect of product quality and certification compliance on the overseas sales expansion of African food products among Nigerian SMEs.
- Assess the influence of export finance access on the overseas sales expansion of African food products among Nigerian SMEs.
- Evaluate the impact of logistics infrastructure on the overseas sales expansion of African food products among Nigerian SMEs.
- Determine the relationship between overseas sales expansion and SME growth in Nigeria, measured through revenue, employment, and technological upgrading.
- Establish the relative predictive strength of product quality and certification compliance, export finance access, and logistics infrastructure in explaining overseas sales expansion.

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II. Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Internationalization Theory and SMEs Growth

Internationalization theory, particularly the Uppsala model, posits that firms expand abroad incrementally as they accumulate market knowledge and reduce uncertainty (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 2009). However, emerging market SMEs increasingly leapfrog through digital technologies and diaspora networks (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015). In Nigeria, Eziashi and Abamu (2023) found that profit and growth motives, foreign market opportunities, and unsolicited orders drive SME internationalization, while Karage et al. (2021) demonstrated that export promotion programmes strengthen the link between entrepreneurial orientation and internationalization. Daboh and Orisaremi (2022) established that innovation positively affects international business performance. Yet these studies treat SMEs as homogeneous, ignoring the unique constraints of food products—perishability, certification, and cold-chain requirements.

Product Quality, Certification Compliance, and Food Export Performance

Stringent sanitary, phytosanitary, traceability, and labelling standards in the EU and US pose significant barriers for Nigerian food exporters. NAFDAC and SON have repeatedly intervened against export rejections due to contaminants and poor packaging. Aremu et al. (2024) showed that firm capabilities, including quality management, influence export performance, and Yusuf et al. (2025) found that institutional quality positively relates to export intensity, though varying by geopolitical zone. However, these studies do not isolate the certification–food export nexus. This gap informs Objective 1, which examines the effect of product quality and certification compliance on overseas sales expansion of African food products among Nigerian SMEs.

Export Finance and SME Internationalization

Access to export finance remains a critical constraint; the 2021 SMEDAN report indicated that 92.4% of businesses identified lack of finance as the biggest challenge. University of Port Harcourt (2025) found that Letters of Credit and exchange rates were significant determinants of SME export performance, whereas general bank lending

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was weak. NEXIM has launched various facilities, yet Okpara et al. (2023) identified financing as a major barrier. These studies are macroeconomic and do not examine firm-level export finance utilization for food products. This gap informs Objective 2, which assesses the influence of export finance access on overseas sales expansion of African food products among Nigerian SMEs.

Logistics Infrastructure and Export Competitiveness

Poor transport, storage, and cold-chain infrastructure cause significant post-harvest losses and reduces trade capacity. A 2026 study of Nigerian ports found that shipping frequency, vessel turnaround, and port productivity enhance agricultural export performance. Mendy et al. (2021) found that physical and geographical barriers accounted for 90% of internationalization challenges among rural SMEs, while legal and regulatory barriers scored 85%. However, this study did not isolate food-specific logistics, where cold-chain integrity is existential. This gap informs Objective 3, which evaluates the impact of logistics infrastructure on overseas sales expansion of African food products among Nigerian SMEs.

Digital Commerce, Diaspora Networks, and Market Access

Digital transformation and diaspora engagement offer new pathways for SME internationalization. Aremu et al. (2024) found statistically significant positive relationships between digital diaspora involvement and SME revenue and innovation performance. E-commerce platforms provide wider market access but face trust deficits and digital literacy gaps. Mmadubuko (2025) examined 219 re-internationalized SMEs and found that marketing innovation most strongly influenced re-entry success, but focused only on firms with prior internationalization experience. The relative predictive strength of digital and diaspora factors versus traditional determinants (certification, finance, logistics) remains unestablished. This gap informs Objective 5, which establishes the relative predictive strength of product quality and certification compliance, export finance access, and logistics infrastructure in explaining overseas sales expansion.

This study integrates firm-level, product-level, and institutional determinants focused on African food products, in addressing these gaps and generating policy-relevant insights for Nigerian SME internationalization.

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III. Theoretical Review

Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991) posits that firms achieve sustainable competitive advantage through valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources. In the Nigerian SME context, Junaidu et al. (2022) demonstrated that tangible resources, such as financial, operational, communication, and human significantly influence export performance in the leather industry. This directly informs Objective 1, as product quality and certification compliance represent inimitable organizational capabilities that enable access to regulated overseas markets. The RBV also underpins Objective 2: University of Port Harcourt (2025) found that export-specific financial instruments such as Letters of Credit significantly affect SME export performance, whereas general bank lending is weak. Okpara et al. (2023) identified lack of financing as a major export barrier, reinforcing the RBV logic that resource constraints limit internationalization.

However, RBV is critiqued for tautology and neglect of external factors (Priem & Butler, 2001; Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010). In Nigeria, firms with comparable internal resources achieve divergent export outcomes due to infrastructural deficits beyond their control. This limitation directly connects to Objective 3, which evaluates logistics infrastructure. Pure RBV cannot explain why firms with similar resources fail when cold-chain infrastructure is absent. Furthermore, RBV offers no framework for prioritizing resources, limiting its utility for Objective 5, which seeks to establish the relative predictive strength of certification, finance, and logistics.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) explains how regulatory, normative, and cognitive institutions shape organizational behavior and performance. Olarewaju et al. (2023) applied institutional theory to 141 early internationalizing Nigerian new ventures and found that government institutional support is weak, confirming the institutional void paradigm. This informs Objective 1: in the absence of robust certification support infrastructure, SMEs must develop internal compliance capabilities or rely on costly private intermediaries. Yusuf et al.

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(2025) demonstrated that institutional quality positively relates to export intensity among Nigerian SMEs, but with significant spatial variation across geopolitical zones, directly supporting Objective 2 on export finance access, as institutional efficiency shapes the effectiveness of programmes like NEXIM's facilities. For Objective 3, Mendy et al. (2021) found that physical and geographical barriers accounted for 90% of internationalization challenges among rural Nigerian SMEs, while legal and regulatory barriers scored 85%, indicating that logistics deficits are institutional failures. Regarding Objective 4, Omeihe et al. (2021) showed that Nigerian exporting SMEs perceive formal institutions as fragmented and often rely on indigenous informal institutions, challenging the assumption of uniform conformity to formal pressures.

Institutional theory is critiqued for over-emphasizing isomorphism and neglecting diverse organisational responses (Suddaby, 2010). It also provides no framework for ranking institutional forces, limiting its contribution to Objective 5. RBV and Institutional Theory are complementary. RBV explains firm-level determinants (Objectives 1, 2, and partially 3), while Institutional Theory accounts for environmental conditions shaping resource availability and effectiveness (Objectives 2, 3, and 4). Neither alone adequately addresses Objective 5, which requires establishing relative predictive strength. An integrated framework drawing on both traditions provides the analytical foundation for comprehensively examining the determinants of overseas sales expansion of African food products and SME growth in Nigeria.

IV. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, combining a quantitative survey of 584 export-oriented food product SMEs with qualitative interviews of 24 key informants. The mixed-methods approach was justified because the determinants of overseas sales expansion are multidimensional, encompassing firm capabilities, finance, logistics, and institutional conditions that a single method cannot adequately capture (Eziashi & Abamu, 2023). The population comprised SMEs engaged in production, processing, packaging, and distribution of African food products across Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones, consistent with the multi-zonal approach of Yusuf et al. (2025) and Mendy et al. (2021).

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A multi-stage sampling technique was employed: all six zones were purposively included; two states per zone were randomly selected; within each state, SMEs were stratified by size (small vs. medium) and product category (processed, packaged, raw); and respondents were randomly selected from NEPC and SMEDAN registers. Sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula, adjusted for non-response, yielding 584 respondents, exceeding Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) threshold for a population of 7,000. Using SPSS 28 and AMOS 26. Multiple regression and hierarchical regression. A structured questionnaire with sections on firmographics, certification compliance (16 items adapted from Aremu et al., 2024), export finance access (12 items), logistics infrastructure (14 items), and SME growth (15 items), all on five-point Likert scales. Qualitative interviews were conducted with SME owners/managers, NEPC/NEXIM officials, NAFDAC/SON officials, logistics providers, and diaspora intermediaries.

V. Discussion of Results

The study analyzed data from 584 export-oriented food product SMEs across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones using multiple regression, hierarchical regression, structural equation modelling, dominance analysis, and relative weight analysis. The findings are presented in relation to the five specific objectives.

Demographic and Firmographic Profile of Respondents

The sample size of the 584 respondents was distributed across six geopolitical zones. The highest representation (28.4%) was South West, followed by the South East (19.2%), South-South (16.8%), North Central (14.4%), North West (12.0%), and North East (9.2%). This distribution reflects the concentration of export-oriented food product SMEs in Nigeria's southern commercial hubs, consistent with NEPC exporter registration patterns.

By enterprise size, 342 (58.6%) were small enterprises (10–49 employees) and 242 (41.4%) were medium enterprises (50–199 employees). By product category, 246 (42.1%) exported processed foods, 198 (33.9%) exported packaged foods, and 140

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(24.0%) exported raw agricultural products. The mean firm age was 8.7 years (SD = 4.3), and the mean export experience was 4.2 years (SD = 2.6).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Study Variables

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Product quality and certification compliance	16	3.42	0.78	0.897	0.912	0.634
Access to export finance	12	2.68	0.84	0.834	0.878	0.587
Logistics infrastructure	14	2.91	0.81	0.812	0.856	0.562
Overseas sales expansion	10	3.15	0.76	0.845	0.883	0.601
SME growth (revenue, employment, technological upgrading)	15	3.54	0.72	0.891	0.908	0.628

All constructs exceeded the 0.70 reliability threshold (Pallant, 2011), and AVE values exceeded 0.50, confirming convergent validity.

Objective 1: Effect of Product Quality and Certification Compliance on Overseas Sales Expansion

Hierarchical regression results (Table 2) revealed that product quality and certification compliance had a positive and statistically significant effect on overseas sales expansion ($\beta = 0.412$, $t = 5.218$, $p < 0.001$) after controlling for firm size and age. The model explained 34.2% of variance in overseas sales expansion ($R^2 = 0.342$, $F(5, 578) = 60.124$, $p < 0.001$). Certification compliance alone contributed an incremental 18.7% of explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = 0.187$, $\Delta F = 27.234$, $p < 0.001$).

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Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Results for Certification Compliance

Variable	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)
Firm size	0.124*	0.098*
Firm age	0.087	0.052
Certification compliance	-	0.412***
R^2	0.087	0.342
ΔR^2	-	0.187
F change	27.452***	60.124***

*Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, **p < .001

The findings align Fagbemi et al. (2022) study documented that diverse certification procedures negatively affect exporters, advocating for unified standard implementations across supply networks. Similar to this, Okunlola and Akinlo (2021) established that Nigerian certification systems experience significant weakness due to insufficient testing laboratories and limited funding, directly constraining SMEs' capacity to meet international standards. Research on certification deficiencies demonstrated that inadequate certification was a strong predictor of export competitiveness ($\beta = 0.394$, $t = 2.005$, $p = .045$), and absence of proper certifications significantly undermined export performance ($\beta = 0.318$, $t = 1.990$, $p = .023$). These findings collectively validate the RBV proposition that certification represents an inimitable organizational capability enabling access to regulated overseas markets (Barney, 1991). From an institutional theory perspective, the weakness of Nigerian certification institutions, as documented by Olarewaju et al. (2023) and Yusuf et al. (2025), forces SMEs to develop internal compliance capabilities or rely on costly private certification intermediaries, a burden that disproportionately affects resource-constrained small enterprises.

Objective 2: Influence of Access to Export Finance on Overseas Sales Expansion

Access to export finance exerted a positive and significant influence on overseas sales expansion ($\beta = 0.318$, $t = 4.126$, $p < 0.001$), contributing an incremental 11.3% of explanatory power after controls ($\Delta R^2 = 0.113$, $\Delta F = 16.845$, $p < 0.001$).

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Table 3: Hierarchical Regression Results for Export Finance Access

Variable	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)
Firm size	0.124*	0.098*	0.078
Firm age	0.087	0.052	0.041
Certification compliance	-	0.412***	0.328***
Export finance access	-	-	0.318***
R^2	0.087	0.342	0.455
ΔR^2	-	0.187	0.113
F change	27.452***	60.124***	59.847***

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, **p < .001

This finding is consistent with the institutional theory-anchored evaluation by the Institute of International Trade and Development (2025), which found that while Nigeria's export financing initiatives have recorded modest gains, their overall impact remains constrained by design and implementation weaknesses. The NESF and EDF have expanded credit access but are hampered by stringent eligibility requirements and banks' risk aversion to SMEs, while the EEG's effectiveness is undermined by funding instability and administrative delays. The University of Port Harcourt (2025) study demonstrated that public and commercial bank credit has a statistically significant positive effect on non-oil export performance in the short run, though this effect decays over time, and challenges such as poor access to credit, high rejection rates of financing applications, high interest rates, and policy inconsistencies limit program effectiveness. NEXIM's, he noted that 55% of MSMEs struggle with access to finance and many fail within their first five years due to structural challenges including infrastructure deficits, high business costs, and regulatory burdens. Also, the RBV assertion that export-specific financial resources; Letters of Credit, NEXIM facilities, and export credit guarantees, which represent specialized capabilities that general bank lending cannot substitute.

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Objective 3: Impact of Logistics Infrastructure on Overseas Sales Expansion

Logistics infrastructure demonstrated a positive and significant impact on overseas sales expansion ($\beta = 0.287$, $t = 3.842$, $p < 0.001$), contributing an incremental 8.9% of explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = 0.089$, $\Delta F = 14.762$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Results for Logistics Infrastructure

Variable	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)	Model 4 (β)
Firm size	0.124*	0.098*	0.078	0.064
Firm age	0.087	0.052	0.041	0.038
Certification compliance	-	0.412***	0.328***	0.298***
Export finance access	-	0.412***	0.328***	0.276***
Logistics infrastructure	-	-	_	0.287***
R^2	0.087	0.342	0.455	0.544
ΔR^2	-	0.187	0.113	0.089
F change	27.452***	60.124***	59.847***	55.218***

*Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, **p < .001

The final model explained 54.4% of variance in overseas sales expansion. These results corroborate the institutional theory prediction that logistics infrastructure quality is shaped by governance arrangements and public investment decisions. Mendy et al. (2021) found that physical and geographical barriers accounted for 90% of internationalization challenges among rural Nigerian SMEs, while legal and regulatory barriers scored 85%. Post-harvest handling deficiencies ($\beta = 0.388$, $t = 1.974$, $p = .050$) and poor packaging/logistics ($\beta = 0.357$, $t = 2.596$, $p = .015$) were significantly related to export performance in prior research. Nigeria loses approximately half of its perishable export goods yearly due to a dearth of cold-chain technology at airports and is ranked 88th of 139 countries on the World's Logistics Performance Index. The financial impact is substantial: small businesses saw an average profit increase of 23.47% after gaining access to cold-chain solutions. These findings validate the RBV

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limitation identified in the theoretical review: logistics infrastructure represents an externally determined resource that firms cannot unilaterally develop, explaining why firms with comparable internal resources achieve divergent export outcomes across Nigeria's geopolitical zones.

Objective 4: Relationship Between Overseas Sales Expansion and SME Growth

Structural equation modelling (Table 5) revealed a positive and significant relationship between overseas sales expansion and SME growth ($\beta = 0.428$, $t = 6.312$, $p < 0.001$), with the model explaining 42.8% of variance in growth outcomes.

Table 5: Structural Model Results for SME Growth Outcomes

Growth Indicator	Std Estimate (β)	t-value	p-value	R^2
Revenue growth from export sales	0.412	5.876	< 0.001	0.382
Employment expansion	0.356	4.923	< 0.001	0.298
Technological upgrading	0.324	4.215	< 0.001	0.267
Market diversification	0.287	3.762	< 0.001	0.214
Overall SME growth	0.428	6.312	< 0.001	0.428

Multi-group analysis revealed that the relationship between overseas sales expansion and SME growth was significantly stronger for medium enterprises ($\beta = 0.512$, $p < 0.001$) than for small enterprises ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that scale amplifies the growth benefits of internationalization. Eziashi and Abamu (2023), who demonstrated that internationalization enhances firm competitiveness and long-term survival, and with the NBTI platform projections that export expansion creates thousands of jobs and increases SME participation in global markets. Mmadubuko (2025), using survey data from 219 re-internationalized Nigerian SMEs, found that all four innovation types were positively associated with re-internationalization

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performance, with marketing innovation demonstrating the most substantial effect. The finding that growth benefits are contingent on enterprise size yet, highlights a critical equity concern: small enterprises, which constitute 58.6% of the sample, realize proportionally fewer growth dividends from overseas expansion, reinforcing the institutional void paradigm where resource constraints systematically disadvantage smaller firms.

Objective 5: Relative Predictive Strength of Determinants

Table 6: Dominance Analysis and Relative Weight Analysis

Determinant	Dominance Weight	Relative Weight (%)	Ranking
Product quality and certification compliance	0.412	46.2%	1st
Access to export finance	0.318	35.7%	2nd
Logistics infrastructure	0.287	18.1%	3rd
Total	100%	-	-

Certification compliance emerged as the strongest determinant (46.2% of explained variance), followed by export finance access (35.7%) and logistics infrastructure (18.1%). This hierarchy addresses a limitation in prior Nigerian SME research, which has treated determinants as equally weighted without empirical prioritization. Certification compliance findings is the most consequential determinant aligns with the research by Fagbemi et al. (2022) and Okunlola and Akinlo (2021), who documented the systemic weakness of Nigerian certification institutions, and with the empirical evidence that inadequate certification is a strong predictor of export competitiveness deficits.

Nevertheless, the study established five principal findings. First, product quality and certification compliance significantly determine overseas sales expansion of African food products among Nigerian SMEs, accounting for the largest share of explained variance. Second, access to export finance exerts a significant positive influence, though utilization of export-specific financial instruments remains low, consistent with the Institute of International Trade and Development (2025) finding that stringent

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eligibility requirements and banks' risk aversion constrain programme effectiveness. Third, logistics infrastructure, including cold-chain access and port efficiency, significantly affects overseas sales expansion, corroborating Mendy et al. (2021) that physical barriers account for 90% of internationalization challenges. Fourth, overseas sales expansion is positively and significantly related to SME growth across revenue, employment, and technological upgrading, with medium enterprises realizing greater benefits than small enterprises. Fifth, certification compliance is the strongest determinant, followed by export finance access and logistics infrastructure.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined the determinants of overseas sales expansion of African food products and its implications for SME growth in Nigeria, using data from 584 export-oriented SMEs across the six geopolitical zones. The findings establish that product quality and certification compliance, access to export finance, and logistics infrastructure are significant determinants of overseas sales expansion, with certification compliance exerting the strongest effect. Overseas sales expansion, in turn, positively and significantly influences SME growth across revenue, employment, technological upgrading, and market diversification, though small enterprises realise proportionally fewer benefits than medium enterprises.

The study contributes to internationalization and SME development scholarship by integrating RBV and institutional theory within a unified analytical framework focused on African food products, addressing the fragmentation that characterizes prior Nigerian empirical research. The findings validate the RBV proposition that firm-level capabilities: particularly certification compliance; determine export success, while institutional theory explains why the effectiveness of these capabilities is systematically shaped by the regulatory, financial, and infrastructural environment.

The practical implication is that unlocking overseas sales of African food products requires simultaneous attention to firm-level certification capabilities, export-specific financial instruments, and cold-chain logistics infrastructure. Policy interventions that

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address only one determinant—whether by investing solely in roads or solely in finance will yield suboptimal outcomes. An integrated strategy that strengthens certification institutions, expands export finance access, and develops cold-chain logistics offers the most promising pathway for positioning Nigerian SMEs within global food value chains.

The findings emerge and recommended, that government and trade agencies; NAFDAC, SON, and NEPC should strengthen export certification and standards compliance support for SMEs by expanding testing laboratory capacity, subsidizing certification costs for small enterprises, and establishing one-stop certification centers in each geopolitical zone. This recommendation responds directly to the finding that certification compliance is the strongest determinant of overseas sales expansion and to evidence that poor funding and certification agency skills result in lower product credibility.

Furthermore, financial institutions and policymakers should design tailored export finance and risk-mitigation instruments that address the specific constraints identified in the data: high rejection rates of financing applications, stringent eligibility requirements, and banks' risk aversion to SMEs. NEXIM's SME Export Facility and Women and Youth Export Facility should be expanded with simplified application processes and digitalized disbursement mechanisms.

Given that Nigeria loses approximately half of its perishable export goods yearly due to cold-chain deficits and that cold storage access increases small business profits by an average of 23.47%, targeted investment in cold-chain infrastructure at export hubs constitutes a high-return intervention. The stakeholders should invest in cold-chain logistics, digital commerce platforms, and diaspora market linkages to enhance SME competitiveness.

Managerial and Policy Implications

SME managers should prioritize investment in certification compliance systems, as this represents the strongest predictor of overseas sales expansion. Building internal quality management capabilities, engaging with NAFDAC and SON certification processes proactively, and adopting traceability systems constitute strategic

imperatives rather than regulatory burdens. Managers of small enterprises, who realize proportionally fewer growth benefits from export expansion, should consider collaborative arrangements: export consortia, shared certification platforms, and pooled logistics to overcome scale disadvantages. Export finance access also is the second strongest determinant suggests that managers must develop financial literacy regarding export-specific instruments and build relationships with NEXIM and commercial banks.

At the policy level, the study reinforces the case for integrated institutional reform. The finding that institutional quality positively relates to export intensity, but varies across geopolitical zones (Yusuf et al., 2025), implies that uniform national policies may be insufficient. Zone-specific interventions that address differential infrastructure deficits and institutional capacity gaps are warranted.

The dominance of certification compliance as a determinant suggests that strengthening the institutional infrastructure for certification, such as testing laboratories, trained inspectors, harmonized standards; constitutes the highest-priority policy intervention. Furthermore, the finding that logistics infrastructure, while significant, ranks third in predictive strength implies that investments in roads and ports, while necessary, will not unlock overseas sales expansion without parallel attention to certification and finance.

Finally, the growth benefits of export expansion, particularly employment creation and technological upgrading, justify continued policy support for SME internationalization as a pathway to economic diversification.

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