EFFECT OF DISTINCTIVE COMPETENCES AND TECHNOLOGICAL CAPABILITIES ON THE GROWTH OF MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES IN BENUE STATE

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Abstract
In Nigeria, as with other developing countries, the entrepreneurial activities of medium enterprises aid in revitalizing the economy. However, the capability of medium enterprises to identify their core competences and embrace modern technologies in their operations is essential to achieving the desired growth. It is in ine with the above assertion that the paper determined the impact of distinctive competences and technological capabilities on the growth of medium scale enterprises in Benue state. Consistent with studies of this nature, the paper also adopted a survey research design. The population of the study comprised of the 249 registered medium scale enterprises in Benue State. (SMEDAN 2022). However, given that the population is small the entire population was considered for the purpose of data collection. The paper depended on data from primary sources through questionnaires. The paper adopted ordinary least square regression model to test the impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The findings of the study that distinctive competences have a positive and insignificant impact on the growth of medium scale enterprises while technological capabilities have a positive and significant impact on the growth of medium scale enterprises in Benue State. From the findings, the study recommended that businesses should not rely on their distinctive competences alone for growth as the contribution of the variable to growth is relative and that businesses should concentrate more on applying computerised ways of production, marketing and sales in order to compete actively with other businesses.
Keywords: *Business Growth, Distinctive Competences, Technology, Medium Scale Enterprises*

INTRODUCTION

The need for small and medium scale enterprises to register growth and development in their operations cannot be overemphasised. This is based on the fact that as globalisation increases businesses in Nigeria will continue to face some of the most daunting changes and challenges ever. Fierce competition from mass producers in advance economies coupled with changing demographics, and shifting consumer purchasing patterns are forcing many Nigerian businesses to alter the ways they have traditionally conducted business. In order for local businesses to survive and perform well, there is the need to identify what specific organizational resources and capabilities that would enable them to enjoy superior performance (Dotun et al., 2021). These specific and unique resources and capabilities are termed as distinctive competencies. The distinctive competencies of any firm arise from two sources that are its resources (man, machine, materials, land, state of art, methods) and capabilities. A differentiating competency is ability that allows one firm to achieve superior efficiency, quality, innovation or customer responsiveness and thereby attain a competitive advantage (Thi et al., 2023). Hence, the primary objective of any firm is to sustain competitive advantage by maintaining strong growth rate and high profitability.

Furthermore, all organizations are trying their level best to gear themselves up for the competition. Any organization that aims at capturing a disproportionate share of profits from tomorrow's market needs to build its competencies (Fred, 2021). The core competence helps in providing added customer value, competitor differentiation and extendibility. The area of distinctive competence is emerging, and it needs a lot of attention in order to describe the capabilities that may be responsible for leadership in a range of products or services. Distinctive competence is part of a collective knowledge gain in the organization. It is a process of imparting information, harmonizing streams of technologies and involvement of people from all functions (Dubey & Ali, 2013). It is the latest paradigm of strategy. There has been a shift of paradigms in various disciplines and strategy has also moved from the trend of competing for the product leadership

to the recent trend of competing for core competence leadership (Bae & Lawler, 2020). The above average returns can be delivered only from assets and skills that are hard to imitate. These skills need to be developed overtime as they make organizations immune to competition through investment and information exchange by the organization's human capital (Friday et al., 2022). The management must peep inside their organizations for precious, unique and costly to imitate resources, and then exploit these resources to create an edge over its competitors.

On the other hand, technologies have an important impact on medium enterprises in developed and developing countries. ICT is creating new opportunities by enabling design and delivery of digital goods, allowing firms to increase margin and revenue by accessing foreign markets directly. Burke (2010) observed several important benefits from owning websites, such as having new customers and additional sales by firms. Certain infrastructures must be in place in order to benefit from ICT adoption so as to deliver better services and explore new business opportunities. ICT platforms (such as PCs, mobiles, internet, etc.) have immense contributions to organizations. The advantages are felt through increased visibility to business enterprises, information dissemination to small firms, overcoming traditional trade barriers and facilitating financial transactions (Piatkowski, 2020). Furthermore, the use of e-mail, e-commerce, and social media network have significantly cut down on the physical transportation involved in sending mail, banking, advertising, and buying goods. Clift (2013) notes that the private sector should not only be able to invest in an ICT infrastructure but also use ICTs as a means of competitive advantage to conduct business in the form of commercially-driven connectivity, software, technology, e-commerce, online transactions and so on.

Medium entrepreneurs (MEs) in Nigeria engage in business practices for survival as they are local in their nature of operation but they need to forge ahead only through global integration even though the local institutional frame work are not steadfast encouraging the development of medium enterprise towards the world economy as those of other countries. Despite medium enterprises having core competency in terms of core product with much skills, knowledge, and attitude yet their product is imitated by others making the customers of the product to almost at all-time buy imitation of the product believing that it is the original product produced by such companies. There are repeatedly imitations of ME products in Benue state indicating the same production name but different taste and having similar packaging. Consumers hence start to deride from buying the firm's product and this decreases entrepreneurship development in the sector because other related firms in the industry are busy imitating the product instead of creating a new product, adding value to the existing product, creating an entirely different product or innovating another product.

From the extant literature, it is observed that there are few studies that addressed distinctive competence and technological capabilities as tools for MEs growth. However, there is a need to conduct this study since the previous studies were not able to address distinctive competences and technological capabilities and MEs growth using Benue state as reference. Thus, the problem that is identified for this study is how medium scale businesses can be developed with respect to technology and other core competences to meet the challenges presented by globalization in the face of available infrastructure and utility in Nigeria. Therefore, the broad objective of this study is to determine the impact of distinctive competences and technology on the growth of MEs in Benue state.

The following hypotheses guided the study;
HO_1: Distinctive competences have no significant impact on the growth of MEs in Benue state
HO_2: Technological capabilities have no significant impact on the growth of MEs in Benue state

LITERATURE REVIEW

Distinctive Competencies

Prahalad and Hamel (1990) as cited by Bae and Lawler (2020), defined distinctive competencies as the collective learning of the organization, especially how to coordinate diverse production skills and integrate

multiple screams of technology. It is an area of specialized expertise that is the result of harmonizing complex streams of technology and work activities. Kim and Baek (2019) view core competence as strategic flexibility that regards resource deployment and routine reorganization. To them, the integration of key capabilities in the company wide business activities is known as core competency. The concept of core competency is viewed as a group of competencies just belonging to an organization and could not be imitated (Edgar et al., 2012). Halberstadt et al. (2019) stated that businesses organizations convert their resources as well as skills into core competencies which cause them to create stable competency advantage in unique environments. According to Ndubuisi (2011), organizations competencies is a competitive advantage that includes rarity, not to be imitated, not to be replaced, permanency and be under control, where these factors are the basics of factor analysis for current research.

The core competence revival draws on a rich tradition from the literature of economics and management. Stephen et al (2017) aligns with previous literature that firm uniqueness can help develop competitive advantage and that uniqueness and innovation in a firm often leads to long term firm success. Pisano and Shuen (1990) defined core capabilities/competencies as a set of differentiable skills, complementary assets and routines that provide the basis for a firm's competitive capacities and sustainable advantages. While Fazal et al. (2019) opined that the suppliers' core competencies/capabilities determine product and market development. Researchers such as Bae et al. (2020) avails that successful firms that have used strategies built on core capabilities and core competencies. Core competence can be defined as communication, involvement and a deep commitment to working across organizational. Core competence can be assessed on the basis of three criteria: value to customers benefit, access to a wide variety of markets and difficult for competitors to imitate. If a company has made an outsourcing decision and transferred a part of its services, the executives and the staff can accumulate more resources and pay more attention to the development its core competencies (Gimzauskiene & Staliuniene, 2010).

The core competence is identified as the focal point while developing the creative potential for innovation and in the customer-focused market it is important to think on behalf of the customer (Gold et al., 2017). It is often believed that competence is a combination of knowledge skills and attitudes which are required by employees in their jobs or tasks. For example, Lau et al. (2012) and Dabo (2020) aver that competence is an ability to perform certain tasks for which knowledge, skills attitude and motivations are necessary. The individual competencies activate the tangible and intangible resources that take part in the value creation process (Kim et al., 2019). This concept is conceptualized in this study as a unique idea or skills/resources which a firm employed to bring out quality product that is difficult to imitate by competitors in similar industry.

Technological Capabilities

The information technology revolution enhanced or provides economic growth and development through aggregate productivity to those nations that have access and ability to use these technologies in the manufacturing sectors. The revolution in IT has enable the manufacturing organization to achieve higher productivity of output by workers' and positively influenced time and space in sending and retrieving of information both within and across diverse organizations and countries. Adebowale and Hossana (2020) stated that competitive environment in which firm operates has significant effects on the returns from IT investments. IT has been shown to play important roles in achieving competitiveness among manufacturing companies at various levels (Adebowale et al., 2020). He also indicates that IT skill or technical skills interact with other factors of production to ensure that resources available to the manufacturing enterprise are efficiently and profitably employed to maintain or improve the firms' share of the product market. In macroeconomics analysis, the so-called new growth theory has respectively incorporated technology as an important factor that is endogenous to the economy in explaining growth and trade performances. Also, Adebowale et al. (2013), maintained that in a free market, firms cannot gain sustainable competitive advantages from technologies that are available to every firm, it is only when technology create significant barriers to entry that it becomes profitable to invest in. Nigeria is classified as a late industrializer in which

management structure (Style) and working environment can reduce workers' productivity from IT in manufacturing sectors.
Sadun and Reenen (2017) indicated that the reasons why return to IT differ across firms are that different firms have very different management style and environment into which IT is placed. He also stated that US economy achieved higher productivity return from IT than UK economy because UK economy operate old-style or Tayloristic organization system that are characterized by bureaucracies, rigid and centralized hierarchies where decisions are made by senior managers.

Medium Enterprises Growth
Business growth has been viewed differently by different scholars. Of the early definitions of growth is that of Penrose (1959) as documented by Kim et al. (2019) defined growth as meaning increase in size, or an improvement in quality as a result of a process of development in which an interacting series of internal changes leads to increases in size accompanied by changes in the characteristics in the growing object. The definition was further advanced to view growth as a product of an internal process in the development of an enterprise and an increase in quality and/or expansion.

Growth according to Cassar (2006) as cited by Ahmed et al. (2017), is defined as a variation in size during a specified period of time. In another view, Brush et al. (2009) defined growth as to mean geographical expansion, increase in the number of branches, inclusion of new markets and customers, increase in the number of products and services, fusions and acquisitions. Ahmed (2019) posited that growth can be viewed in relation to: increase in sales, increase in the number of employees, increase in profit, increase in assets, increase in the firm's value and internal development which comprises of competences, organizational practices in efficiency and the establishment of professional sales process.

According to Absanto and Nnko (2013), growth is seen as the increase in sales, assets, net profits as well as taking advantage of the garnered experience in order to minimize unit cost of products thereby increasing profit. Coad et al. (2013) argued that growth is the consequence of a decent organization of resources and capabilities which the organizations use to advance growth which include capabilities, acquired data, monetary directing and resources. Most of these definitions laid more emphasis only on increase in number of branches, customers and employees without considering the level of loyalty of such customers and employees which has been argued to be a very crucial factor in determining growth.

According to Akinlemi (2018), organizations nowadays need to be customer focused not only for survival but to forecast a consistent growth in market by achieving a repetitive customer rate and spreading out of a positive word of mouth referrals. Hence, business should not only focus on profit as an indicator of growth but rather concentrate more on value creation for her customers. They further argued that financial profit can be a short-term incentive for an organization but building loyalty and customers' satisfaction develops relationships which in turn brings profit and long-term growth.

Empirical Review
Hurgessa (2022) investigated the key factors affecting the growth of MSEs in Kirkos sub city in Addis Ababa. In this study, mixed research methods were used followed by concurrent triangulation strategy. It also used descriptive study and explanatory research. A total of 242 micro and small sized enterprises owners and managers were sampled from the study sub city Stratified simple random sampling was used to select proportional number of samples from the study area. This comprised of manufacturing, trade, service, agri-business and others. Both primary and secondary source of data were used. To obtain the primary data, questionnaires (based on Likert Scales) were distributed to access the growth status of sampled respondents and also to examine factors affecting their growth. A pilot study was undertaken with MSEs owners to test the reliability of the questionnaire. Using multiple regressions, this study found that distinctive competences, management and marketing skills, technological capabilities, and access to external financing and human

resources capacities have a statistically significant contribution to MSEs growth. A Nigerian study is desirable to bridge the gap in problems of external validity.

Dabo (2022) examined the role of distinctive competences, innovation, technological capabilities and empathy among micro and small enterprise owners in poverty reduction in Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey method to collect data to address this problem. The study population comprised 3120 MSEs registered with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Plateau State, Nigeria. The sample size comprised 342 respondents. A semi - structured questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions was administered. Cronbach's Alpha Test was used to test the reliability of the instrument. The study used descriptive and inferential statistics in analyzing the data. The study further concludes that distinctive competences, innovation, technological capabilities and empathy among entrepreneurial MSE owners help in improving performance, as well as poverty reduction in Nigeria. This study will explore a wider approach by considering the entire North Central Nigeria.

Ngutiku (2021) examined customer needs, empathy and distinctive competences have influenced the growth of the MSEs in Kenya. This study was anchored on the epistemology philosophy and adopts a positivist approach. The study used a cross sectional survey research design where, a self-semi structured questionnaire was administered to collect the primary data from the target population who were the MFIs customers. The Study was being limited to five deposit taking MFIs, the key respondents of the study were limited to owner-managers of micro and small enterprises in Kenya accessing the entrepreneurial services from the selected five deposit taking and offering the targeted entrepreneurial services. The MSEs customers that were sampled using the multistage cluster sampling the questionnaire were tested for reliability and validity. Data was analyzed using the descriptive to analyze qualitative data and inferential statistics. The study found that there is positive relationship between customer needs, empathy and distinctive competences on Growth of Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) in Kenya.

Adebowale and Hossana (2020) investigated how technological capabilities and distinctive competency influence the dynamic capabilities of service sector micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in Lagos, Nigeria. Using an abductive method, data from 388 service sector MSEs was examined through exploratory factor analysis. The resultant model suggests that mobile app usage barely increases the absorptive capability (integrating new learning into the organization) of MSEs; rather, it strongly influences the ability to seize opportunities. The result implies that technological capabilities and distinctive competency have significant influence on MSEs in Lagos.

Umar and Nwaiwu (2017) assessed core competencies and entrepreneurship development among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Abuja. Despite SME firms having core competency in terms of core product with much skills, knowledge, technology, and attitude yet their products are imitated by others making the customers of the product to buy imitation of the product believing that it is the original product produced by such SMES. Point in time data were collected from primary source using questionnaire. The study adopted a survey research design. The population of the study is 1260 and a sample size of 348 is gotten using Taro Yamane formula. The regression and correlation statistical tools were adopted to analyse the data and findings reveal that core competencies and entrepreneurship development among SMEs in Abuja is significant. It was also found that there is a relationship between core product and entrepreneurship development among SMEs in Abuja.

The Resource Based Theory

The resource-based theory propounded by Penrose (1959), maintained that, firm's competitive advantage is based on the possession of tangible and intangible resources, which are difficult or costly for other firms to obtain (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). The foundations of the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm can be found in the work by Penrose in the middle of the 20th century (1959) that conceived the firm as an administrative organization and a collection of productive resources, both physical and human. Material

resources, as well as human resources, can provide the firm a variety of services. The same resources can be put to use in different ways. There is a close relationship between the knowledge that people in the organization retain and the services obtained from the resources, so that firms are really repositories of knowledge. The RBV of the firm focuses specially on the inside of the firm, its resources and capabilities, to explain the profit and value of the organization (Penrose, 1980; Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Peteraf, 1993; Makhija, 2003). This theory is applied to explain differences in performance within an industry (Hoopes et al., 2003). The RBV of the firm states that differences in performance happens when well succeeded organizations possess valuable resources that others do not have, allowing them to obtain a rent in its quasi-monopolist form (Wernerfelt, 1984).

The Knowledge Based Theory

The economic change of material-based production to information-based production created a revaluation of the firm workers. Increasingly we find knowledge-based workers at the core of the organization functions: concept and technology designers, as well as finance and management people. Other individuals are considered to be in the firm's periphery, as a consequence their responsibilities change permanently and they are defined by the tasks they perform at the moment. This way, a new differentiation in labour arises (Child &McGrath, 2001). Many firms consider that to act with efficacy in today's economy, it is imperative for them to become a knowledge-based organization. But few understand what that means, and how to make the changes necessary to achieve it. Perhaps the most common mistake firms make is considering that the higher the knowledge-based content of their products and services, the closer they are to being true knowledge-based organizations. But the products and services are only the visible and tangible reality they present to their clients – the tip of the iceberg. As in real icebergs, the largest reality that allows the firm to produce is located below the surface of the water, hidden in the intangible assets of the organization, and it entails the knowledge of what the firm does, how it is done, and why it is done that way (Zack, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study included the two hundred forty-nine (249) registered medium enterprises in Benue State (SMEDAN 2022). Because the population is small, the entire companies were considered for the purpose of data collection. Data was collected using a well-constructed five-point likert scale questionnaire ranging from strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. Each item in the questionnaire was developed to address the research questions of the study. The questionnaire consists of close-ended questions. This approach was used since closed-ended questions are easy to code and analyse. This approach was also preferred as adopted by other studies and tested for validity and reliability. The reliability test result using Cronbach alpha indicated that distinctive competences, technological capabilities and business growth have an alpha value of 0.9111, 0.9787 and 0.09601respectively. Given that the acceptable threshold was placed at 70% it was concluded that the scales used for the study were reliable to capture the independent variables. The study used the regression analysis to test the hypotheses. The model for the study is specified thus:

GROT = f (DCP and TECH)

The above equation can be written in more detail form as follows:

$$\boldsymbol{GROT = \beta 0 + \beta 1 DCP_i\, TECHi + U_i} \quad \text{.....(1)}$$

Where;
GROT = Medium Enterprises Growth
DCP = Distinctive Competences
TECH = Technological Capabilities
β0 = intercept/constant term
β1, β2, = coefficients of determination
U= error term

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Response Rate

The number of questionnaires distributed was 249 out of which 232 were appropriately completed and returned. The result for the response rate is as displayed below.

Table 1: Response Rate

Response	Frequency	Percent
Returned	232	93
Unreturned	17	7
Total	249	100

Source: Researcher's Computation, 2023

The results in Table 1 showed a total positive response rate of 82%. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) a response rate of above 50% is sufficient for a descriptive study. Babbie (2004) also posited that response rates of above 50% are considered adequate for analysis and publication. He concluded that 60% is considered good, 70% very good while 80% and above is excellent. Built on these affirmations from well-known scholars, 82% response rate is considered appropriate for the study.

Table 2: Correlation Coefficient Matrix

	BUSGROT	DCP	TECH
BUSGROT	1.000		
DCP	0.7760	1.000	
TECH	0.9497	0.0869	1.0000

Source: Researcher's Computation using STATA 16, 2023

Table 2 presents the result of correlation coefficient among the variables to examine the possibility of presence of multicollinearity. The result of pearson correlation coefficient showed absence of multicollinearity among the variables as all the figures are below the threshold of 0.9 or 0.8. The table also showed that there is positive correlation between business growth and distinctive competences/ technology. Hence, the regression analysis using OLS would not provide bias result.

Table 3: VIF and Tolerance of Business Growth

Variables	VIF	1/VIF
DCP	2.63	0.380790
TECH	2.63	0.380790
MEAN V/F	2.63	

Source: Researcher's Computation using STATA 16, 2023

Similarly, the result of VIF and its inverse indicate the absence of multicollinearity. Table 3 shows that VIF and tolerance value as all the variables had VIF of less than 10 and tolerance of higher than 0.5 since the values were the benchmark of 10 for VIF and above 0.10 for tolerance. Having established the absence of multicollinearity in time series next section considers the presentation and interpretation of OSL results.

Table 4: Summary of OLS Regression Result

Variables	Statistics	P-values
DCP	0.1050313	0.254
TECH	0.8676321	0.000
R Square (overall)	0.9041	
Adj. R square	0.9008	
F-Statistics	278.02	0.0000

Source: Researcher's Computation using STATA 16, 2023

The table 4 above presented the summary of the result for the model of the study. This is used to predict the relationship between the dependent and independent variables and to further test the strength of the relationship. The overall R Squared indicated 0.9041 which evidences a statistically strong relationship. The result of the adjusted R Squared indicated 0.9008, meaning 90% of business growth can be predicted using distinctive competences and technology. Based on the above evidence, together with result of multicollinearity which proved the absence of the problem of heterogeneity (that is, a constant variance that exists in the panel) and the absence of Heteroskedasticity, the OLS regression model is chosen and used in the analysis and hypotheses testing.

The results from the table indicated that the independent variables (distinctive competences and technology) explained for 90% of the variations in the dependent variable. The table also showed that the model is fitted as evidenced by the F-Statistics of 278.02 which is significant at 1% level of confidence (P-value 0.0000).
The result in the Table 4 showed that distinctive competences (DCP) have a statistically positive and insignificant effect on the growth of medium enterprises in Benue state as indicated by the coefficient of 0.1050313 which is insignificant at 5% level of significance (P-value 0.254). Based on this, the study accepts the hypothesis that distinctive competences have no significant effect on the business growth of medium enterprises in Benue state.

The results in Table 4 showed that technological capabilities (TECH) have a statistically significant positive effect on the growth in Benue state as indicated by the coefficient of 0.8676321 which is significant at 1% level of confidence (P-value 0.000). That is to say that the technological capabilities of medium enterprise can significantly increase their growth. Based on this outcome, the study rejects the null hypothesis two ($H0_2$) which states that, technological capabilities have no significant effect with the business growth of medium enterprises in Benue state.

Discussion of Results
The findings from the study reveal that SMEs distinctive competences have a positive but insignificant impact on business size and growth. This finding supports the study of Ngutiku (2021) and Umar and Nwaiwe (2017) and contradicts that of Hurgessa (2022) who avers that MEs can create distinctive competences but should not rely basically on theses abilities as other factors such as defining customer group, identifying customer needs etc are other important variables that can stimulate growth in a business. The finding from the paper also reveals that SMEs technological capabilities have a significant positive impact on business size and growth. This finding is in tandem with the study conducted by Adebowale and Hossana (2020) who posits that a good investment in model technology will improve performance; alter way of operations and bring about cost saving thereby increasing the revenue of the company.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper seeks to determine the impact of distinctive competences and technological capabilities on the growth of medium enterprises in Benue State. It was concluded that distinctive competences are a good but not an absolute strategy to rely cause a monumental increase in the growth of medium enterprises. That technological capabilities are veritable mechanism for improving business operationality in a variety of way including production, sales, customer services, supply chain, product as well as service quality which are core to improving business growth overtime.
From the findings and conclusions of the paper, the following recommendations are made:

1) Medium Enterprises can develop their distinctive competences but should not depend on only this variable to stimulate growth but should also consider other factors such as identifying customer needs, defining customer group etc as they are also very important mechanisms for growth.
2) It is also recommended that Medium Enterprises should invest more in modern technologies that can facilitate production and other processes of the business in order to grow.

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