

A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SMALL AND MEDIUM- SIZED ENTERPRISES ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

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Article History: Received: 20 February 2025; Reviewed: 30 May 2025;

Accepted: 20 June 2025; Available online: 27 June 2025.

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ABSTRACT. This study aimed to identify prominent themes discussed in the research on the internationalization of SMEs on the African continent from 2005 to 2023. For this study, a total of 50 articles were selected, and thematic analysis was conducted to identify the prominent themes. Among the fifty articles selected for this systematic literature review (SLR), seven prominent themes were found: pull factors, network theory, export performance, mindset, entry mode decision, institutions, and barriers to internationalization. In this sample of articles, the most discussed themes are pull factors, network theory, and export performance, while the least discussed is barriers to internationalization. The findings of this study suggest that further research should be conducted to examine how the mindset of entrepreneurs or top managers may affect the internationalization of African SMEs, and how this may also affect the mode of entry adopted by small and medium size enterprises (SMEs). In addition, further research should be conducted on the barriers to internationalization of SMEs on the African continent. Lastly, this study recommends that further research be conducted on the role that institutions play in facilitating the internationalization of SMEs in Africa. The significant contribution of this study was identifying the prominent themes concerning internationalization in the African context. In addition, it identified areas for further research in order to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon in Africa.

Keywords: Internationalization, Africa, SME, SLR, Thematic analysis

JEL Classification: F23, L26, O55

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Recommended citation: Sithole, M.A., A systematic literature review on the internationalization of small and medium-sized enterprises on the African continent, *Studia UBB Negotia*, vol. 70, issue 2 (June) 2025, pp. 101-137, <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbnegotia.2025.2.04>

Introduction

SMEs play a crucial role in the economy of Africa: in 2017 the Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) sector accounted for approximately ninety percent of all businesses on the African continent and contributed approximately fifty percent to its Gross Domestic Product or GDP (Muriithi, 2017). It has been shown by researchers such, as Abisuga-Oyekunle *et al.* (2019) and Mahamadou (2021), that SMEs play a crucial role in the socio-economic development of Africa. For example, on the continent SMEs have contributed to improving life quality and income distribution through generating employment for the growing number of Africans (Abisuga-Oyekunle *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, SMEs have contributed to the industrialization of the continent and enhanced its competitiveness.

This positive contribution can be even higher in the case of internationalised African SMEs. As a way to increase SMEs' contribution to employment generation and socioeconomic development, Osei-Bonsu (2014) suggests that SMEs may consider internationalizing and expanding internationally. In their study, Abisuga-Oyekunle *et al.* (2019) argue that there is evidence suggesting that African enterprises that engage in global business through exporting and foreign ownership tend to create a greater number of jobs than enterprises that do not participate in global business. Thus, the internationalization of SMEs in Africa is pivotal (Abisuga-Oyekunle *et al.*, 2019).

However, internationalising SMEs may face several difficulties coming from either their own weaknesses or from various developments and features in their business as well as in their economic, political, and social environment. The internationalization of SMEs is influenced by several factors, including access to resources unavailable domestically, lower trade barriers, trade agreements, purchasing resources at a lower cost, access to higher value markets, and domestic market conditions (Aldibiki & El Ebrashi, 2023; Misati *et al.*, 2017). African SMEs might find it difficult to internationalize due to institutional voids such as corruption, infrastructure barriers, and investment promotion policies (Mahamadou, 2021).

Our understanding of the internationalization of SMEs in Africa is limited because the literature on the internationalization of enterprises focuses on developed countries and on large multinational enterprises or MNEs (Kujala & Owusu, 2022). This is unfortunate because SMEs have different characteristics

compared with large MNEs, and thus different factors may persuade or dissuade them to internationalize (Steinhauser *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, developed and developing countries encounter different socioeconomic factors, making it difficult to generalize theories and empirical findings about the phenomenon from developed countries to developing countries (Kujala & Owusu, 2022; Haddoud *et al.*, 2017). These differences may lead to different internationalization behaviours among enterprises. In addition, there are large differences among the countries of the continent as well. Thus, the literature on this phenomenon in the African context may not be applicable to all African countries because of differences in socioeconomic conditions, levels of development, and economic structures (Mahamadou, 2021; Zahoor *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, the socio-economic conditions and institutional contexts may influence the enterprises' propensity to internationalize and engage in international markets differently (Kujala & Owusu, 2022).

Researchers, such as Goncalves (2022), Zahoor *et al.* (2023), Misati *et al.* (2017), and Amoako & Matlay (2015), have highlighted that there is a limited number of studies that focus on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa. Subsequently, policymakers are making decisions and recommendations based on data from advanced economies (Damoah, 2018), which may be misleading, as it was highlighted above. Using a systematic literature review (SLR), this article adds to the body of knowledge by combining and analysing articles related to the internationalization of SMEs in Africa between 2005 and 2023. In this study, the researchers will identify some gaps in the literature and identify some predominant themes through the use of an SLR. As part of this paper, the following research questions will be addressed:

Research Questions

- Which is the current state of research on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa?
- In the literature on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa from 2005 to 2023, what themes are considered relevant?
- What gaps still exist in the literature that could be opportunities for future research in the field?

Methodology Section

In conducting the SLR, several articles provided guidance, such as Oguji *et al.* (2018) and Zahoor *et al.* (2023). Tranfield *et al.* (2003) explained that a SLR consists of three steps: firstly, the researcher plans how the SLR will be

conducted, secondly, the researcher executes the plan, and thirdly, the researcher reports and disseminates their findings. As a starting point for the SLR, internationalization and SMEs were defined, which explains the study's conceptual boundary. Secondly, the researchers discuss the screening criteria that was used in the SLR. Thirdly, a descriptive analysis of the articles included in the SLR is provided, and subsequently the researcher explains the current state of research, in this particular case on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa.

Broad conceptualization

Internationalization

Internationalization is a growth strategy through which enterprises expand geographically and increase their involvement and commitment to international markets (Eduardsen & Marinova, 2020). The process of internationalization may involve expanding an enterprise's business activity outside of an enterprise's domestic market (Fernandes *et al.*, 2023; Adomako *et al.*, 2021). Fernandez & Nieto (2006) argue that SMEs internationalize when a part of or all of their sales are generated by foreign sales. Damoah (2018), however, asserts that internationalization is the process of adapting the structure, resources, and strategy of an enterprise to the international environment. It is evident from the different definitions of internationalization by various scholars (Eduardsen & Marinova, 2020; Fernandes *et al.*, 2023; Adomako *et al.*, 2021; Fernandez & Nieto, 2006; Damoah, 2018) that there still is no consensus regarding its definition.

SMEs

Based on the size of the workforce, Zahoor *et al.* (2023) found that there is no consensus about what defines an SME on the African continent. For example, according to Ahimbisibwe *et al.* (2022a), in Uganda an enterprise is considered an SME if it has fewer than 249 employees. According to Mahamadou (2021), an enterprise in Sub-Saharan Africa is considered a SME if it has ten to 300 employees. In Ghana, enterprises are considered SMEs when they have a maximum of ninety-nine employees (Damoah, 2018; Amoako & Matlay, 2015). A study conducted by Okpara & Kabongo (2010) in Nigeria identified enterprises that had between ten to five hundred employees as SMEs. SMEs are not uniformly defined in Africa, which hinders the analysis of the internationalisation of SMEs because the data is incomparable. In this section, the researchers have discussed the various definitions of internationalization and SMEs. In the next section, the authors will discuss the criteria they used for selecting articles that formed part of the study's sample.

Screening Criteria

The screening criteria describe along what considerations the researchers chose which articles to include or exclude from the sample. The screening criteria were based on literature review articles written by other scholars in this field. For this study, the articles had to have been published between 2005 and 2023 in order to meet the screening criteria. Secondly, only articles that focused on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa were considered, thus articles that focused on other regions were excluded. Thirdly, the articles had to be written in English. Fourthly, the articles were retrieved only from Scopus, Science Direct, Emerald, Sabient, and Taylor & Francis databases in order to focus only on high quality publications. To assess the quartile of journals, the researchers used Scimago Scientific Journal Ranking. Only articles in quartiles Q1 to Q4 were considered to ensure high quality. Articles that were not included in this database were not taken into account. The researchers used the following keywords: Internationalization, SMEs, and Africa. For the keyword 'internationalization', the researcher also used 'exporting' as one of the synonyms since it is commonly used by SMEs to enter global markets (Ipsmiller & Dikova, 2021; Adomako *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, the keywords *foreign entry*, *entry mode choice*, and *regional integration* were used as synonyms for internationalization. For the keyword *Africa* the researcher accepted either the names of the fifty-four African countries; furthermore, the researcher also accepted articles that had the following keywords: *Sub-Saharan Africa*, *West Africa*, *East Africa*, and *North Africa* as synonyms for the keyword *Africa*. For the keyword *SME*, the researcher also used *small and medium enterprises*, and *small businesses* as synonyms. The next section will provide an overview of the literature analysed. Also, it will illustrate the state of the research in the period between 2005 and 2023.

Which is the current state of research on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa?

As part of the assessment of the state of research on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa, a spreadsheet was created to identify the articles that may form part of the sample because they contained the keywords and focused on African countries. Using this spreadsheet, the researcher used the Scimago database to determine the quartile in which each journal ranked: if the journal in which the article was published was not ranked between Q1 and Q4, it was excluded from the analysis. The ranking of the journal is important because practitioners in academia and scholars may attribute quality to the article based on the journal it was published in (Vogel *et al.*, 2017). As a result of this analysis,

the researchers found that 28 of the articles appeared in journals ranked Q1, twelve articles were published in journals ranked Q2, four were published in journals ranked Q3, and six were published in journals ranked Q4. Furthermore, the researchers discovered that of the fifty articles selected for the sample, thirty-four came from different journals. There were five articles in the Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development, followed by four in the African Journal of Economic and Management Studies, three in Thunderbird International Business Review, and three in Acta Commercii. Table 1 illustrates the different journals that the articles for this study were found in. First, the journals in the table are sorted into quartiles starting with journals ranked Q1 to Q4, and within each quartile, the journals are sorted based on where the majority of articles in that quartile were published.

Table 1. Journals the articles were retrieved from

Name of Journal	Number of papers in the journal	Ranking of the Journal
Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development (J.Small Bus. Enterp. Dev)	5	Q1
Thunderbird International Business Review (TIBR)	3	Q1
Journal of Business Research (JBR)	2	Q1
Journal of International Management (J.Int. Manag)	2	Q1
World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development (World J.Entrep.Manag.Sustain. Dev.)	2	Q1
Competition & Change (Compet Change)	1	Q1
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice (ETP)	1	Q1
International Business Review (Int Bus Rev)	1	Q1
International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation (Int.J.Entrepreneurship Innov.)	1	Q1
International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research (Int.J.Entrep.Behav. Res)	1	Q1
International Journal of Emerging Markets (IJoEM)	1	Q1
International Marketing Review (Int.Mark.Rev.)	1	Q1
International Small Business Journal (ISBJ)	1	Q1
Journal of Global Marketing (J.Glob.Mark)	1	Q1
Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship (J.Small Bus.Entrep).	1	Q1
Journal of Strategic Marketing (J.Strateg.Mark)	1	Q1
Management Decision (Manag.Decis)	1	Q1
Online Information Review (Online Inf.Rev.)	1	Q1

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Name of Journal	Number of papers in the journal	Ranking of the Journal
Technovation	1	Q1
African Journal of Economic and Management Studies (Afr.J.Econ.Manag.Stud.)	4	Q2
Review of International Business and Strategy (Rev.Int.Bus.Strategy)	2	Q2
Africa Journal of Management (AJOM)	1	Q2
Critical Perspectives on International Business (CPOIB)	1	Q2
DEVELOPMENT SOUTHERN AFRICA (Dev.South.Afr)	1	Q2
Global Business Review (Glob.Bus.Rev.)	1	Q2
Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication (Glob.Knowl.Mem.Commun.)	1	Q2
Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies (JEIEE)	1	Q2
Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship (J.Dev.Entrep)	1	Q3
Journal of Transnational Management (J.Transnatl.Manag)	1	Q3
Perspectives on Global Development and Technology (Perspect.Glob.Dev.Technol.)	1	Q3
South African Journal of Business Management (S.Afr.J.Bus.Manag.)	1	Q3
Acta Commercii (Acta Commer.)	3	Q4
International Journal of Business and Globalisation (IJBG)	1	Q4
International Journal of Management and Enterprise Development (IJMED)	1	Q4
Review of Development Finance (Rev.Dev.Finance.)	1	Q4
Total number of articles:	50	

Source: Author's compilation

According to the literature review conducted for this study, the highest number of articles were published in 2017 (7), while five articles were published each year during 2018, 2021, and 2022. There were no articles published in 2007 or 2009 in the sample of articles for this SLR. Figure 1 illustrates the number of articles published each year.

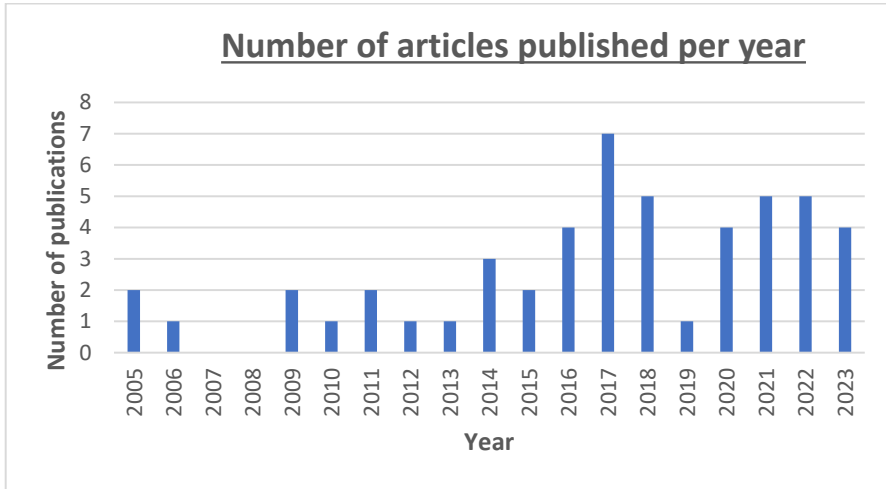


Figure 1. Number of articles published per year
Source: Author's compilation

In this study, fifty articles were reviewed, fifteen of which were qualitative. Additionally, twelve of those fifteen qualitative articles used interviews for data collection. Secondly, 29 of the articles selected for this SLR were quantitative, 26 out of the 29 used questionnaires with closed-ended questions to collect data, and the other studies used statistical analysis software to analyse data they acquired from databases. Among the sample of 50 articles, six used mixed approaches. A significant number of these articles collected data using both questionnaires and interviews. Lastly, forty-eight of the articles selected as part of this sample were empirical, and only two were conceptual. In comparison to Ipsmiller & Dikova's (2021) SLR on SME internationalization in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), which examined 141 articles in total, the majority (93) of the reviewed articles were quantitative, only 12 used mixed methods, and the remaining (24) were qualitative. In addition, only 12 articles of the 141 articles reviewed by Ipsmiller & Dikova (2021) were non-empirical, while the rest were empirical. The significant difference between this study's sample size and the sample size of the article used by Ipsmiller & Dikova (2021) may be explained by the limited amount of research on the internationalization of SMEs on the African continent. This problem is reiterated by researchers such as Goncalves (2022) and Misati *et al.* (2017) who urge researchers to conduct more research on the internationalization of SMEs on the African continent. The next section within this methodology part discusses how different themes within this study were identified.

To assess which themes have been considered prominent from the year 2005 until 2023, the researchers conducted a thematic analysis (TA). TA is a technique used by researchers to identify and report themes and patterns within qualitative data in order to answer the research questions of their study (Willig, 2014; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Morgan (2022) explains that there are a variety of methods for identifying themes and patterns in qualitative data (Morgan, 2022). Vaismoradi & Snelgrove (2019) describe TA as an interpretive research approach that relies on the researcher's subjectivity and insight to interpret data and develop themes. As outlined by Kiger & Varpio (2020), this study adopted the following process for its thematic analysis:

- Getting familiar with the data

The researcher first ensured that the articles met the screening criteria, afterwards the full text was read.

- Generating initial codes and searching for themes

To summarize the articles and identify the prominent themes from the sample, the researcher used the data extraction form created by Cacciotti & Hayton (2015). The same data extraction form was used by Eduardsen & Marinova (2020). This included headings such as methodology, purpose, research questions, and findings. In this study, the data extraction form was modified to include 'the type of paper' as a heading, and articles were listed by their authors' names.

- Reviewing themes, defining and naming them

Another researcher with extensive experience worked with the researcher to identify themes within the sample of articles. Both researchers then reviewed the themes to ensure they encapsulated the data within each theme.

In this section of methodology, we have discussed how the researcher identified the different themes among the articles selected for the SLR. In the next section, we will discuss the different themes identified within the articles.

In the literature on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa from 2005 to 2023, what themes have been considered relevant?

SMEs have created a large number of jobs on the African continent and have contributed to the continent's growth in sales and employment (Abor & Quartey, 2010). Despite the important role that SMEs play in the socio-economic development of the continent, they still have a high failure rate (Olaore *et al.*, 2020). SMEs account for a large number of enterprises on the African continent, as explained by El Guili (2018), and as a result the internationalization of SMEs in Africa has become an important topic for researchers. Based on a study by Olaore *et al.* (2020), internationalization improves SMEs' competitiveness in Africa. The

following section of the SLR discusses the literature on the internationalization of African SMEs between 2005 and 2023, as well as undertakes a thematic analysis to identify the main themes. In the scope the literature review, the researchers identified the following themes: ***pull factors, network theory, export performance, barriers to internationalization, mindset, entry mode decision, and institutions.***

Pull factors

The first theme to be explored in this SLR is *Pull factors* which focuses on factors that drive or influence SMEs to internationalize from their home markets. There are thirteen articles on this theme, nine of them are quantitative, three are qualitative, and one is a mixed-method article. The article written by Gyamerah *et al.* (2020) was identified as one of the articles that are part of the *Pull Factor* theme because the article identified the different factors that persuaded SMEs from East Africa to internationalize, and it illustrated how SMEs from different industries may internationalize through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The purpose of this article was to assess whether the BRI benefitted SMEs from East Africa, and it specifically focused on SMEs from Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Tanzania. In this theme, articles were included from all four regions of Africa (North, Southern, West, and East). All the articles in this theme identified the factors that encouraged SMEs to internationalize in the various regions, and they all emphasized the importance of the internationalization of SMEs. In comparison to other themes in the study, the identification of factors that encourage SMEs to internationalize was found to be a prevalent topic throughout the African continent.

Table 2. Pull factors

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main research findings
Gyamerah <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Whether the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) benefitted SMEs from East Africa, focusing specifically on Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Tanzania.	26 SME owners/managers from Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Tanzania. Qualitative Interviews	The results of this study show that BRI initiatives have a direct and indirect impact on the internationalization of SMEs in Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Tanzania. Furthermore, this study found that partnerships, innovativeness, and specialized services played a crucial role in the internationalization of these SMEs within the BRI initiative.
Adomako <i>et al.</i> (2021)	To examine the impact of the usage of R&D support on driving internationalization as well as the mediating effect of this association.	227 SMEs from Ghana. Quantitative surveys	In this study, R&D support was positively correlated with technological capability, and technological turbulence played a crucial role in moderating this relationship.

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Damoah (2018)	This study assessed the critical incidents that lead to SMEs in Ghana initiating exports in the garment and textile sectors	36 Ghanaian SMEs Qualitative Interviews	In this study, government awards, international orientations, and unsolicited orders were among the factors that led to export initiation by SMEs
Misati <i>et al.</i> (2017)	This study examined some of the antecedents and consequences of SMEs' South-North internationalization. In addition, it analysed these SMEs strategies, methods, and timing when expanding internationally.	3 SMEs from Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda. Qualitative Interviews	In this study, they found that integrating several internationalization frameworks, like network theory and Uppsala, led to a better understanding of how SMEs internationalize.
Omer <i>et al.</i> (2015)	This study illustrated that going abroad can help SMEs in South Africa overcome some of the challenges they face domestically such as competition, corruption, legislation, and finance gaps	962 SMEs in South Africa Quantitative surveys	Internationalization, the size of the enterprise, and education were identified as some of the most important factors that help SMEs overcome domestic barriers.
Mtigwe(2005)	The purpose of this study was to identify the internationalization process entrepreneurial enterprises adopted, additionally, it identified the outcomes from internationalization	494 SMEs from South Africa and Zimbabwe. Quantitative surveys	Based on the results of this study, there is a common model of internationalization for entrepreneurial firms in Southern Africa.
Van Staden (2022)	The purpose of the study was to indicate and assess the main factors that are influencing the export orientation of SMEs in South Africa	240 SMEs in South Africa Quantitative surveys	This study identified various factors (government support, willingness to participate in export, marketing capability) which influenced the export propensity of SMEs however, the willingness to export was ranked highest by the study's participants. Additionally, this factor had a high correlation with management commitment and marketing capability. Lastly, this study found that SMEs performance is influenced by government support, marketing capabilities, and management support.
Babatunde (2017)	The purpose of the study was to investigate among SMEs in Nigeria the determinants of export propensity and intensity.	The study's sub-sample was 349 SMEs Quantitative	This study found that the following factors are crucial determinants of the SMEs export propensity and they also strengthen the SMEs export intensity: age of the enterprise, labour productivity, capital and skill intensity, access to loans, managerial experience, and infrastructure

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main research findings
Shree & Urban (2012)	This research was conducted to investigate and clarify the different capital factors that encourage and inhibit South African SMEs from expanding internationally	67 SMEs in South Africa. Quantitative surveys	This study found that financial capital items were deemed as obstacles to the SMEs ability to expand abroad
Abor <i>et al.</i> (2014)	The purpose of the study was to investigate how SMEs export activities are affected by their access to bank finance	This study used datasets on SMEs in Ghana which were acquired from Regional Project on Enterprise Development (RPED). The dataset spanned from the year 1991 until 2002. Quantitative	The study's result suggests that access to bank finance could improve the SMEs' odds to export. Additionally, this study found that firms that were most probable to enter international markets through exporting were older, larger, and productive.
Sibanda <i>et al.</i> (2018)	This article examined how the exporting behaviour and performance of Zimbabwean SMEs was affected by their accessibility to finance.	159 SMEs from Zimbabwe Quantitative surveys	In this study, access to finance was found to positively influence SMEs' export behaviour in Zimbabwe. Hypotheses 2 and 3 were not supported by the study's results.
Haddoud <i>et al.</i> (2017)	This study's aim was to assess the determinants of export propensity amongst SMEs in Algeria	208 Algerian SMEs Quantitative	This study's analysis revealed that in Algeria five clusters exist. Each cluster varies in terms of resources and capabilities, and each cluster is related to export propensity differently
Ayakwah <i>et al.</i> (2020)	This study examined the role played by return entrepreneurs in internationalizing Ghanaian SMEs	82 Firms in Ghana Mixed methods Surveys Interviews	The study found that return entrepreneurs (RE) are crucial to the internationalization of SMEs since they are able to develop and grow international customer networks. Additionally, their ability to help their enterprises meet international standards makes them catalysts for internationalization. Lastly, this study found that RE can build trust-based relationships within their business structures in their domestic market, and they can establish and maintain relationships with overseas customers.

Source: Author's compilation

Export performance

Exporting is the most commonly used mode of entry by SMEs because in comparison to other modes of entry it requires the least amount of resources and commitment (D'Angelo *et al.*, 2011; Kumari *et al.*, 2023; Cassiman & Golovko, 2011). According to Rua *et al.* (2018), the size of the enterprise and international experience are some of the determinants of export performance, but the researchers emphasize that no consensus has been reached on the determinants of export performance. Export performance was identified as the second theme amongst the sample of articles. This theme consisted of twelve articles. The analysis of the articles in this theme revealed three prominent sub-themes: export promotion programs, strategic orientation, and export intensity. Those articles that did not fit into these subthemes were grouped into another theme called ***other***.

Export promotion programs (EPPs)

SMEs may face numerous challenges when entering foreign markets due to a lack of resources and a lack of knowledge of the market, which inhibit their ability to compete (Malca *et al.*, 2020). Governments have thus created measures such as export promotion programs (EPPs) to assist enterprises in foreign markets to overcome some of the challenges they may encounter (Catanzaro & Teyssier, 2021; Sraha, 2014). One of the subthemes identified by this study is EPP, which contains three articles. One article in this theme, Quaye *et al.* (2017) discusses how a country's decision to participate in promoting their country in other countries may help the country improve its export performance. For example, the purpose of Quaye *et al.* (2017) study was to comprehend the relationship between export promotional activity and the export performance of Ghanaian manufacturing firms. The study found that exporters should focus on conducting specific EPPs such as attending trade fairs, maintaining foreign offices, and offering financial incentives, because they were found to be positively correlated to export performance. The communality amongst the three articles is that they discussed how EPPs affected the export performance of their SMEs, and they were based in countries in West Africa.

Table 3. Export promotion programs (EPPs)

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Njinyah (2017)	This study had the aim to assess the importance of both the direct and indirect effects of government policies for export promotion (GPEP) on the performance of cocoa exporting Cameroonian SMEs	101 SMEs in Cameroon Quantitative surveys	Overall, this study found that the GPEP had a direct and indirect impact on the performance of exporters in Cameroon

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Quaye <i>et al.</i> (2017)	This study aims to investigate the impact of export promotion programmes on export performance.	169 SMEs in Ghana. Quantitative surveys	In this study, it was found that exporters in Ghana should use particular export programmes such as trade fairs, tax and financial incentives in order to strengthen their performance.
Sraha (2014)	This study investigated the entrepreneurial development within the Ghanaian value-added export sector and analysed EPPs and their effects on the export performance of these firms abroad.	This paper relied on secondary data, it assessed the EPPs used in Ghana by the public policy makers	This study identified the factors (export training, market access, and export assistance programmes) that influence exporters to improve their export performance.

Source: Author's compilation.

Strategic orientation

Strategic orientation is the strategic direction that an enterprise may adopt to acquire good business performance (Cho *et al.*, 2022). Strategic orientation reveals the philosophy of an enterprise: underpinning this philosophy is the enterprise's beliefs and values it exhibits when competing in the market and making decisions (Adams *et al.*, 2019; Vlasic, 2022). There are many types of strategic orientations that an enterprise may adopt: for example, Vlasic (2022) discusses market orientation (MO) and technology orientation, Gao *et al.* (2018) discusses proactive orientation and entrepreneurial orientation (EO) has been discussed by various researchers such as Wales *et al.* (2020) and Lee *et al.* (2019). There are three articles under this sub-theme, all of which examine how the different strategic orientations affect the performance of SMEs. As an example, Robb & Stephens (2021) examined 259 South African SMEs; during this study, they examined whether export performance was related to strategic orientations (market orientation and proactive orientation), market capabilities, and innovation, as well as the strength of the relationship. Some of the study's findings was that market orientation (MO) did improve SMEs market capabilities. Another finding was that proactive orientation (PO) did improve innovation in SMEs. The other two articles focused on SMEs in Nigeria, and both assessed how EO affected SMEs' export performance. All three of these articles, to varying degrees, discussed the impact of proactive orientation on the enterprises' export performance.

Table 4. Strategic orientation

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Robb & Stephens (2021)	The aim of this study was to assess the relationship between market orientation (MO), proactive orientation (PO), market capability and innovation as they affect the export performance of SMEs in South Africa	259 South African SMEs. Quantitative surveys	This study found that MO does improve SMEs' marketing capabilities. Secondly, it found that PO does improve SMEs' innovation. Thirdly, it also found that market distance does have an adverse influence on export performance. Fourthly, it found that concerning South African SMEs innovation does improve their market capability. Lastly, it found that innovation and market capability improved these SMEs' export performance.
Okpara & Kabongo (2010)	This study assessed the impact of entrepreneurial export orientation on the performance of Nigerian SMEs	143 Nigerian SMEs Mixed methods Surveys Interviews	According to this study's results, proactive entrepreneurs participated in the export market more than conservatives. Additionally, it found that SMEs that were proactively orientated performed better SMEs that were conservatively orientated.
Ajayi (2016)	This study assessed how institutional factors may impact export performance of SMEs in the Nigerian agricultural sector	235 Nigerian agricultural SMEs. Quantitative surveys	This study found that in the Nigerian agricultural sector, entrepreneurial orientation, networking capability, and institutional environment were positively correlated with the export performance of SMEs.

Source: Author's compilation.

Export intensity

This sub-theme consists of two articles: one of the articles used quantitative methods to gather data whilst the other one used mixed methods. The two articles in this theme are vastly different; however, they both assessed export intensity. The article written by Crick *et al.* (2011) assessed the differences amongst Tanzania exporters with low export intensity and exporters with high export intensity in relation to their perceived competitiveness in global markets. Whilst the article by Tarek *et al.* (2016) analysed competitive intelligence and further explored how it affected the international competitiveness of North African SMEs. Although this study did not have clear research questions it analysed the relationship between North African SMEs' export intensity and their use of business and competitive intelligence.

Table 5. Export intensity

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and Method	Main Results
Crick <i>et al.</i> (2011)	In this study, the researchers examined whether Tanzanian internationalizing SMEs with low or high export intensities differed.	205 Tanzanian SMEs Mixed methods Interviews and surveys	The results provide insight into the patterns of internationalization amongst the two types of firms.
Tarek <i>et al.</i> (2016)	This study assessed the extent to which the international competitiveness of SMEs is linked to competitive intelligence.	180 North African (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia) SMEs Surveys	Innovation and the protection of information assets moderate and mediate the relationship between business intelligence and SMEs' international competitiveness

Source: Author's compilation

Other themes

This category consisted of four articles and there are no similarities amongst the articles other than that they focus on SMEs export performance. For example, the purpose of the study conducted by Hinson & Abor (2005) was to assess the extent to which non-traditional Ghanaian exporters use the Internet. Whilst the purpose of the study by Abubakari *et al.* (2021) explored the effect of foreign market knowledge on the export performance of Ghanaian SMEs. The study conducted by El Makrini (2017) was based on Moroccan SMEs, and it found that the size of enterprises was positively correlated to its export sales. Additionally, this study found that R&D and advertising were also positively correlated to the SMEs' export sales. Lastly, the study conducted by Easmon *et al.* (2019) found that social capital was not positively correlated with the export performance of Ghanaian SMEs.

Table 6. Other themes

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Hinson & Abor (2005)	The purpose of the study was to assess the usage of internet amongst internationalizing SMEs, specifically non-traditional exporters	106 exporting SMEs in Ghana Qualitative Questionnaires	In this study, it was found that nontraditional exporters had low levels of internet usage. Additionally, this study found that there was a strong relationship between internet usage and the age of the SME.

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Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Abubakari <i>et al.</i> (2021)	This study examined the effect of foreign institutional knowledge (FIK), foreign business knowledge (FBK), and internationalization knowledge (IK) on the export performance of SMEs.	257 SMEs in Accra, Ghana, Quantitative surveys	This study found that FIK, FBK and IK had a positive effect on the export performance of SMEs
El Makrini (2017)	This study examined Moroccan SMEs' export performance based specifically on size, R&D, advertising, and network relationships.	168 SMEs in Morocco. Quantitative	This study found that the size of the enterprise did have a positive relationship with export sales. Secondly, it found that expenditures on R&D had a positive relationship with export sales. Thirdly, it found that advertising had a positive relationship with export sales. Lastly, it found that being part of a business network did increase the export sales of the enterprise
Easmon <i>et al.</i> (2019)	This study analysed the impact of social capital and market-based capabilities on the export performance of SMEs in Ghana	297 Exporters from Ghana. Quantitative Questionnaires	This study found that social capital, innovation, and marketing capabilities influenced the export performance of SMEs in Ghana

Source: Author's compilation

Network theory

Network theory is an approach that has been commonly used to comprehend the internationalisation process that some enterprises have adopted (Peiris *et al.*, 2012). According to Ratajczak-Mrozek (2017), Johanson & Mattson (1988) article played a pivotal role in the development and expansion of network theory. In this article, it was explained that the relationships an enterprise has cultivated in its network may enable it to gather the information and resources it needs to enter international markets (Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017). In this study, one of the themes identified was network theory. A total of eight articles were included under this theme, four of which were quantitative, two were mixed methods, and two were qualitative. Although the articles on this theme had different purposes and findings, the concept of network theory underpinned them all. In the study conducted by Aldibiki & El Ebrashi (2023), SMEs in Egypt were examined for their use of various types of networks in

order to enter international markets. The results from this study demonstrated the relationship between the different types of networks and their impact on SMEs' international growth. Another study conducted by Ahimbisibwe *et al.* (2020) examined which level in international networking was essential for the internationalization of SMEs in Uganda. In this study, it was found that network extension and network integration were essential to the internationalization of Ugandan SMEs, but that network penetration was not. The study conducted by Sendawula *et al.* (2020) focused on manufacturing SMEs in Uganda. The purpose of this study was to determine what role organizational learning plays in mediating the relationship between business networking and internationalization. The study found a positive correlation between business networking and Ugandan SME internationalization. Secondly, the statistical analysis performed by the researcher indicated that business networking was strongly associated with organizational learning, which supported the researcher's hypothesis. There was a wide range of purposes and methodologies used in these articles, which reflected their heterogeneity, these differences are illustrated in Table 7. Despite the differences in the studies in this theme, a majority of the articles found that an enterprise network played an essential role in SMEs internationalization process.

Table 7. Network theory

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Aldibiki& El Ebrashi (2023)	This study assessed the role networks play in the internationalization of SMEs in an emerging country	300 SMEs in Egypt. Quantitative surveys. Data was analysed using SPSS	Amongst the three types of networks this study found that only non-business networks had a significant direct positive impact on the international performance of Egyptian SMEs.
Ferrucci <i>et al.</i> (2018)	In this study, the different paths that Italian SMEs used when entering the African market were evaluated.	18 managers and entrepreneurs from Italian SMEs in Africa. Qualitative Semi-structured interviews Cross case analysis	This study found that in the African continent networks play a crucial role in facilitating the internationalization of Italian SMEs.
Amoako & Matlay (2015)	This study analysed how certain cultural norms affected the trust building and cooperation amongst the relationships formed by exporting Ghanaian SMEs	12 SMEs in Ghana. Qualitative Interviews Case study	The findings of this study shed light on how indigenous and global norms have hybridized over time. Furthermore, it illustrated how this hybridization supported the internationalization of Ghanaian SMEs.

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Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Ahimbisibwe <i>et al.</i> (2020)	This article assessed whether the levels of international networking were crucial for the internationalization of SMEs.	206 Ugandan exporting SMEs Quantitative surveys	This study found that there was a positive relationship between network extension and the SMEs internationalization. Additionally, the study's findings disproved the study's second hypothesis. Lastly, the study found that network integration was also positively related to SMEs' internalization.
Sendawula <i>et al.</i> (2020)	This study examined manufacturing SMEs in Uganda and analysed the role of organizational learning in the relationship between business networking and internationalization of these enterprises	96 Ugandan manufacturing SMEs. Quantitative surveys	This study found that there was a significant relationship between organizational learning and the internationalization of SMEs.
Tajeddin & Carney (2018)	This study examined how domestically owned SMEs can cope with imperfect markets through the formation of private governance system, which are illustrated through business groups (BGs).	8885 SMEs from sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Quantitative Data was retrieved from the World Bank's Enterprise Survey (WBES) the data spanned from the year 2006 until 2015. Data was statistically analysed	This study found that in terms of export intensity BG-affiliated SMEs were stronger than independent firms.
Kazungu (2020)	In this study, the impact of network linkages on Tanzanian handicraft exporting MSEs was examined.	171 Tanzanian SMEs. Mixed methods	The findings of this study supported the hypothesis. For example, this study found that that before the implementation of the network programmes, handicrafts-exporting MSEs were not able to access foreign market distributors, local and foreign business associations, raw materials suppliers and ancillary support firms, which are vital to their business operations both in local and foreign markets.

Source: Author's compilation

Institutions

Institutions include judicial systems, governmental structures, and other market structures that determine how enterprises may operate in a country (Voss *et al.*, 2010). A study conducted by Shirokova & Tsukanova (2013) found that institutions play a significant role in the internationalization process of SMEs. The next theme identified was ‘institutions’, which contained five articles. This sample contains three qualitative articles, one quantitative article, and one mixed-methods article. Three of the articles in this sample are focused on West Africa, specifically Nigeria and Ghana. Each article on this theme had a different purpose, but they all discussed and focused on the role of institutions. The article by Amoako & Lyon (2014) sought to determine how contexts influenced the institutions and relationships created by exporting SMEs. Additionally, this article examined how exporting SMEs perceived Ghana’s legal institutions. The purpose of the article by Narooz & Child (2017) was to illustrate the differences between the Egyptian and the United Kingdom (UK) institutions that facilitate SMEs internationalization. There is a commonality between these articles in that they all emphasize the importance of institutions for internationalization. There were a few articles that discussed how the failure or absence of formal institutions has led to the emergence of informal institutions, as demonstrated by Omeihe *et al.* (2021) and Amoako & Lyon (2014). The sample of articles in this theme suggest that institutions play a pivotal role in the internationalization of SMEs.

Table 8. Institutions

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main research findings
Adomako <i>et al.</i> (2021)	“This study examined the relationship between perceived corruption (PC) and degree of internationalization (DOI) through business process digitization (BPD)”	464 CEOs based in Ghana and Nigeria. Quantitative surveys	This study found that perceived corruption had a positive relationship with business process digitization. Additionally, they found that business process digitization had a positive relationship with the enterprises degree of internationalization
Omeihe <i>et al.</i> (2021)	This study aimed to create a better understanding of how trust, indigenous institutions, and formal institutions interact in Nigeria.	36 SME owners in Nigeria. Qualitative Data was collected through conversations, observations, and archival records.	One of the main findings is that in Nigeria, informal institutions such as trade associations have taken over the authoritative role previously played by formal institutions such as courts.

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Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main research findings
Narooz and Child (2017)	In the study, the authors aimed to illustrate the contrast in how developed and developing countries help their SMEs internationalize through their institutional provisions	20 SMEs from Egypt and 20 SMEs from the UK. Qualitative Semi-structured interviews	Some of the results that the researchers found was that in contrast to SMEs in the UK, Egyptian SMEs relied more on the institutional agencies. This study also identified some of the institutional voids Egyptian SMEs encountered. In contrast to Egyptian SMEs, SMEs from the UK did not have a negative perception of the institutions in the UK. Furthermore, this study found that SMEs from the UK in comparison to SMEs from the Egypt have access to information from a wider range of sources.
Amoako & Lyon (2014)	This article examines how exporting SMEs create strategic relationships and institutions in response to the environment in which they operate. Furthermore, it examines how SMEs' strategic partnerships and institutions aid them when the country's institutions are weak.	12 SMEs from Ghana Qualitative Semi-structured interviews	This study illustrates how exporting SMEs have circumvented formalized institutions such as courts and rather rely on culturally specific relationships, and informal institutions to resolve disagreements amongst other business associates.
Sibanda <i>et al.</i> (2018)	This study examined how access to finance affects the behaviour and performance of exporting enterprises in Zimbabwe	159 SMEs from Zimbabwe Quantitative surveys	This study found that there was a positive relationship between exporting behaviour and access to finance.

Source: Author's compilation

Entry mode decision

One of the most crucial decisions an enterprise must make is which entry mode to use to enter an international market (Shen *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, Shen *et al.* (2017) explain that this decision reflects the level of commitment, engagement, and risk that the enterprise is taking. A study conducted by Tepjun (2016) found that the availability of resources influences the entry mode that an enterprise may adopt and the level of commitment that an enterprise may make to foreign markets. Garg (2014) explains that there are two main categories of entry modes equity (joint ventures and wholly owned subsidiary) and non-equity mode (exports and contractual agreements). This theme consists of four

articles. Two of the articles used qualitative methods, the other two articles used quantitative methods to gather information. The purpose of the article written by Mahamadou (2021) was to illustrate how SMEs, particularly the ones in Ivory Coast, internationalize. The results of from the study indicated that most of the SMEs imported products before they began exporting, and additionally the article identified the types (upstream and downstream) of internationalization the SMEs engaged in and the factors that encouraged them to trade with other countries. The table below illustrates the different purposes and methodologies that articles in this theme adopted. Furthermore, Table 9 illustrates how diverse the topic ‘entry mode decision’ is: for example, two of the articles assessed the entry mode that SMEs adopted whilst another study assessed the applicability of the current theories on the internationalization of SMEs and the remaining study investigated the mediating effect of equity entry mode.

Table 9. Entry mode decision

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Research findings
Goncalves (2022)	This study investigated how SMEs from Lusophone Africa specifically Mozambique and Angola internationalize. Additionally, it examined whether the current theories on internationalization are applicable.	29 SMEs from Mozambique and Angola. Qualitative Online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews	The researcher found that different theories of internationalization were suitable and applicable at different phases of internationalization for LASMEs. Additionally, the researcher proposed a new framework that takes this into account.
Mahamadou (2021)	This study illustrated the main paths that Ivorian SMEs adopt when internationalizing.	6 Ivorian SMEs Qualitative Interviews	The results from the interviews illustrated that to enter international markets Ivorian SMEs participated in both upstream (importing) and downstream (exporting) internationalization.
Abubakar <i>et al.</i> (2019)	This study examined if there are specific modes of entry which induced the SMEs innovation in Sub-Saharan least developed countries (LDCs)	1058 SMEs from LDC'S (Djibouti, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Congo) Quantitative This study utilized secondary data that was retrieved from the World Bank Enterprise Surveys (WBES)	The main results from this study infer that foreign technology licensing had a positive relationship with the product and process innovation of Sub-Saharan LDCs SMEs.

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Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Research findings
Amankwah-Amoah <i>et al.</i> (2022)	This article examined when foreign market knowledge (FMK) strengthens SMEs equity mode choice.	205 SMEs from Ghana. Quantitative surveys	The main findings from this study is that equity entry mode choice is a mediator for the relationship between foreign market choice and the enterprises performance abroad.

Source: Author's compilation

Mindset

Mindset (strategy frame or belief structure) may refer to the knowledge structures that an enterprise or entrepreneur may use to make strategic decisions (Nadkarni & Perez, 2007). This theme consisted of three articles, and all three are quantitative and two have the same lead author. The purpose of the first article written by Ahimbisibwe *et al.* (2022a) was to assess the mediation role of international networking between entrepreneurial mindset and internationalizing Ugandan SMEs. The purpose of the second article by Ahimbisibwe *et al.* (2022b) was to assess the relationship between entrepreneurial mindset and the internationalization of SMEs in Uganda. All the articles on this theme focused on countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, they focused primarily on how top management, or the CEO/owner/manager mindset influenced the internationalization of the enterprise.

Table 10. Mindset

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Research findings
Adomako <i>et al.</i> (2017)	The study examined how the CEO's regulatory focus on the SMEs internationalization is influenced by the competitive market and how intense it is	289 SMEs in Ghana Quantitative surveys	The study found that CEOs' promotion focus was stronger as a driver of internationalization when competition in their domestic markets was high
Ahimbisibwe <i>et al.</i> (2022b)	This study examined the relationship between entrepreneurial mindset and the internationalization of Ugandan SMEs	144 SMEs in Uganda Quantitative survey	Among the three mindsets examined, only the implemental mindset was significantly related to SME internationalization.
Ahimbisibwe <i>et al.</i> (2022a)	In this study, international networking was examined as a mediator between entrepreneurial mindset and	206 SMEs in Uganda Quantitative surveys	The results from the study proved that the international networking did have a positive

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Research findings
	the internationalization of Ugandan small and medium enterprises		relationship with the internationalization of SMEs. Additionally, it found that international networking did mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial mindset and the internationalization of SMEs

Source: Author's compilation

Barriers to internationalization

Barriers to internationalization are factors that hinder SMEs from expanding nationally or internationally (Virglerova *et al.*, 2020). This theme focused on articles that identified factors that deter SMEs from internationalizing, in this SLR those factors were labelled 'barriers to internationalization'. The findings of this SLR in terms of 'barriers to internationalization' were in line with those identified by Moreira *et al.* (2024). The review found that the common barriers among the sample of articles included: corruption, inadequate infrastructure, limited capital access, limited market knowledge, insufficient domestic policies and laws, and insufficient research into foreign markets. For example, the article by Okpara & Kabongo (2010) found that factors such as stiff competition in foreign markets, corruption, lack of knowhow on exporting, insufficient infrastructure, constricted access to finance, the scarcity of experienced staff in export planning were factors that hindered their export activities. The communality amongst the three studies is that they are all based on countries that are part of Sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, they all discussed how having knowledge and experience about the mode of entry or a particular market affected their decision to expand there. However, the lack of this knowledge also discouraged them from internationalizing, additionally, they highlighted that bureaucracy was an obstacle.

Table 11. Barriers to internationalization

Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Okpara& Kabongo (2010)	This study investigated how the internationalization of exporting SMEs in Nigeria is affected by the following factors: knowledge barriers, resource barriers, corruption, procedure barriers and external barriers	120 SMEs in Nigeria Quantitative surveys	This study identified some of the factors (restricted access to finance, competition, limited knowledge on exporting, and corruption) that hindered export development in Nigeria

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Authors	Purpose of the study	Sample and method	Main results
Mpinganjira (2011)	This study investigated the 'perceived' impediments to export involvement within non-exporting Malawian SMEs.	80 SMEs from Malawi. Mixed methods approach. Surveys and interviews	This article identified the following factors as impediments to export participation: limited knowledge on export opportunities, and a lack of skills and know-how in exporting.
Thomas & Marandu (2017)	This article identifies and examines the challenges that SMEs in Botswana face when importing and exporting products within Southern Africa.	21 SMEs from Botswana Qualitative Interviews and Observations	In this study, administrative procedures, ambiguity in the application of laws at the borders, and logistical difficulties were identified as some of the main obstacles on the national level.

Source: Author's compilation

What gaps still exist in the literature that could be opportunities for future research in the field?

Researchers such as Zahoor *et al.* (2023) have argued that there is a scarcity of research on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa. Thus, this study was conducted to add to the body of literature on this phenomenon in the African context. Through a SLR, this study summarized the literature available on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa from 2005 to 2023 and identified prominent themes. In conducting the SLR, the researchers discovered only three articles related to the mindset theme. As argued by Acedo & Jones (2007) and Ahimbisibwe *et al.* (2022b), there is a lack of literature examining how cognitive factors such as mindset and behaviour may influence or relate to internationalization. As a result, this study urges researchers to investigate how mindset could contribute to or hinder the internationalization of SMEs in Africa. Additionally, this study urges researchers to examine whether a country's foreign and trade policies affect the mindset of business owners and managers in terms of internationalization. Finally, this study recommends that more research to be conducted that determines whether an owner/top management mindset may influence the entry mode an enterprise uses to expand within the African continent and abroad.

One of the themes that this SLR identified was entry mode decision and this theme consisted of four articles. This theme was essential because as argued by Shen *et al.* (2017), mode of entry is one of the most important decisions SMEs that are intending to internationalize are going to make. This study subsequently encourages researchers to investigate factors that influence

SMEs' decision to enter a market through a particular mode. Secondly, through conducting the SLR, this study recommends that more studies should be conducted that explore how SMEs internationalize in Africa. For example, the study conducted by Mahamadou (2021) illustrated the different paths that Ivorian SMEs adopt when they are internationalizing.

Another theme that this study identified was institutions: this theme consisted of five articles. This study recommends that researchers should investigate how the rise of informal institutions in regions such as West Africa particularly Nigeria and Ghana have affected the internationalization of SMEs in that region. Researchers should also examine if informal institutions have assisted or hindered the internationalization of SMEs. Additionally, it has been demonstrated by Omeihe *et al.* (2021) and Amoako & Lyon (2014) that informal institutions have circumvented formal institutions. According to this study, more research should examine whether informal and formal institutions are able to coexist and how this relationship influences the propensity of SMEs to internationalize within those regions.

Based on the sample of articles analyzed, this study suggests that more studies should evaluate how human capital impacts the internationalization of SMEs in Africa. Dar & Mishra (2019) argue that human capital is crucial to the internationalization of SMEs. In a study by Buzavaite & Korsakiene (2019), the authors suggest that further analysis should be conducted to determine how human capital elements such as education and experience may impact internationalization.

Lastly, amongst the sample of articles for this study it was found that only six articles used mixed methods, the majority of articles were quantitative. In a study conducted by McKim (2016) on graduate students, these students indicated that they perceived mixed methods to be more rigorous than other forms of research methods. Further, they indicated that when mixed methods were used by authors to collect data, they were able to understand the phenomenon better. Researchers should consider adopting this methodology more often since students, who are the main audience for academic research, prefer it.

Discussion

In recent years, there has been an increase in economics and business research focusing on Africa and greater recognition of the region's unique characteristics (Nachum *et al.*, 2022). For instance, there has been a rise in literature reviews discussing the internationalization of African firms, among other topics. As an example, the study by Ibeh *et al.* (2012) reviewed 54 relevant studies between 1995 and 2011. In their study, they highlighted that African firms are increasingly internationalizing, and explained how managerial and

organizational resources, as well as network connections, are key to that process. The study conducted by Boso *et al.* (2019) indicates that African firms have been internationalizing within the African continent, which has resulted in the rise of firms, mainly from certain sectors and from specific countries, such as South Africa and Nigeria, that have dominated their domestic and regional markets.

In contrast to the study conducted by Ibeh *et al.* (2012) and Boso *et al.* (2019) the study conducted by Misati *et al.* (2017) focuses on the internationalization of African SMEs. The study sheds light on some of the antecedents and consequences of the internationalization of African SMEs. Furthermore, it argues that the internationalization of African SMEs may be evaluated through the lens of a multiple-theoretical approach which consists of theories such as the Uppsala model, network theory, and Linkage-Leverage-Learning framework. El Guili (2018) also conducted a study on the internationalisation of African SMEs. El Guili (2018) found that the emergence of regional “champions” as well as other innovative and creative SMEs is one reason for the increased internationalization of African SMEs. El Guili (2018) further explains that the historical context is also critically important when assessing and analysing the internationalization of SMEs. A study conducted by Zahoor *et al.* (2023) also focused on the internationalization of African SMEs. Zahoor *et al.* (2023) noted “...Despite a proliferation of studies on the subject, the literature has hitherto remained fragmented, theoretically limited, and empirically inconclusive, thereby leaving important topics underexplored.”

Internationalisation of African SMEs is analysed in an international comparison with Latin American firms by Moreira *et al.* (2024). They relied on 97 papers for the period between 1995 and 2017, identifying six relevant topics: international networking; financing, export promotion; internationalisation strategies; resources and business environment/context; e-business, e-commerce, and barriers to internationalisation. Moreira *et al.* (2024) found that the focus of articles on African SMEs differed from Latin American ones. For instance, articles that focused on the internationalization of African SMEs mainly discussed supply performance, international behaviour, internationalisation process, knowledge, and key-selection of foreign markets. Furthermore, these articles highlighted the main challenges, opportunities, and perspectives associated with the internationalization of African SMEs.

As compared with the above-described articles, this study focused on articles published between 2005 until 2023. Additionally, in contrast to El Guili's (2018) study that focused on the challenges and risks of internationalizing SMEs in Africa, this study had a different emphasis. For example, this study examined the current state of literature on the internationalization of SMEs in Africa. It identified the gaps in the literature on this phenomenon and suggested areas for further research. Moreover, this article identified and discussed the recurring themes in the research that focused on this phenomenon.

In this study, seven key themes were identified from the sample of articles selected for this SLR. Of the seven themes identified, three (entry mode decision, mindset, and export performance) had not been identified as key themes in previous SLRs conducted by Zahoor *et al.* (2023) and Moreira *et al.* (2024). Furthermore, this study found that MO, technological orientation, and PO also influenced the internationalization of African SMEs besides EO, which was emphasized by Zahoor *et al.* (2023). In Zahoor *et al.* (2023), only two databases were used, Web of Science and Scopus, whereas this study's SLR used a wider range of databases which led to a variety of different journals being assessed such as *Acta Commercii* and the *South African Journal of Business Management*. Additionally, in Zahoor *et al.* (2023), the resource-based view (RBV) and the knowledge-based view (KBV) were identified as prominent theoretical perspectives. However, although RBV and KBV were discussed in a small number of articles, they were not prominent enough within the sample of articles to constitute a theme in this SLR.

The present study, in contrast to the research conducted by Zahoor *et al.* (2023) and Moreira *et al.* (2024), suggested that further research was needed to examine whether foreign trade policies influence business owners' and managers' mindset and their proclivity to internationalize. Researchers such as Ahimbisibwe *et al.* (2022a) have examined the influence of managers' and owners' mindset on the internationalization of SMEs. However, according to this SLR's author, there have been no studies that have investigated whether African countries' foreign trade policies may influence business owners' and managers' mindsets and propensity to internationalize their SMEs. This study also suggested that more research should examine whether informal and formal institutions are able to coexist in those regions (especially West Africa) and whether this influences the propensity of SMEs to internationalize. This suggestion is based on the findings from the study conducted by Omeihe *et al.* (2021) which found that informal institutions in Nigeria such as trade associations have adopted a more authoritative role which was previously occupied by formal institutions such as courts. In addition, the study conducted by Amoako & Lyon (2014) found that in Ghana informal institutions such as chieftaincies and trade associations have adopted a prominent role in resolving conflicts amongst SMEs than formal institutions like courts.

The article written by Nachum *et al.* (2022) contends that in order to have an in-depth and holistic understanding of the business dynamic on the continent its essential to investigate the role that people could play in the development of the African continent. Moreover, this article then discussed the complexities of the African countries and how heterogenous the countries are. Similar to Nachum *et al.* (2022) this article also discussed the role of institutions

on the continent. However, in contrast to this Nachum *et al.* (2022) this article does not discuss the possible relationship between institutions and people instead this article focuses on SMEs and how their internationalization may improve the continents socio-economic development. Moreover, this article discussed rather how institutions both formal and informal could facilitate or hinder the internationalization of SMEs. This study suggests that more studies should be conducted on the role of institutions throughout Africa. In addition, this study suggests more comparative studies to be conducted between African countries on the topic of SMEs' internationalization. Such research may help academics and practitioners to compare institutions amongst different African countries and assess the different roles that institutions play in facilitating the internationalization of SMEs on the continent.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify prominent themes discussed in the research on the internationalization of SMEs on the African continent from 2005 to 2023. By conducting the SLR this study identified the following seven themes: pull factors, network theory, export performance, mindset, entry mode decision, institutions, and barriers to internationalization. In this sample of articles, the most discussed themes were pull factors, network theory, and export performance, while the least discussed was barriers to internationalization. In addition, this study also shed light on areas of research on this phenomenon in the African context that require further research. One of the most important contributions of this study is that it addressed an area of research that is still underexplored, especially within the context of African SMEs. Secondly, this study found that there was a limited number of articles that focus on 'barriers to internationalization' in the context of African SMEs. Identifying barriers to internationalization is crucial as it will help academics and policy makers address the factors that inhibit the expansion of African SMEs internationally. Thirdly, this SLR found there was a limited number of studies analysing how mindset may affect the internationalization of SMEs in Africa, as well as whether the mindset of the top management and founder of the enterprise influences the internationalization of these SMEs. Lastly, this study responded to calls for more research on the internationalization of African SMEs made by researchers such as Zahoor *et al.* (2023), Misati *et al.* (2017), and El Guili (2018).

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