

PROFESSIONALISM AND SME INTERNATIONALIZATION: THE EFFECT OF PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY AND PROFESSIONAL COMMITMENT

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of professionalism on the internationalization of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. Guided by a positivist philosophical stance and a deductive research approach, the study employed a cross-sectional survey across the six geo-political zones of Nigeria, using a probability sampling technique and a total calculated sample size of 365.14. Data were collected using a five-point Likert scale instrument, with 330 valid responses analyzed. Descriptive statistics, factor analysis, principal component analysis (PCA), and non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U, Kruskal-Wallis, Median test) were applied. Hypotheses were tested using chi-square tests. The conceptual model positioned professional autonomy and professional commitment as independent variables and SME internationalization as the dependent variable. Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.933, exceeding the 0.70 threshold. PCA results confirmed the validity of the measurement structure, with KMO values above 0.6 and Bartlett's tests statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). For professional autonomy, one component explained 54.5% of the variance, while professional commitment had two components explaining 40% and 24% of variance, respectively. Findings underscore that both professional autonomy and professional commitment significantly enhance SME internationalization potential in Nigeria.

Keywords: Professionalism, SME Internationalization, Professional Autonomy, Professional Commitment, Nigeria

1.1 BACKGROUND

In their efforts to contribute to economic growth, SMEs are expected to operate with a sense of total professionalism. They look for opportunities outside of their home nations to develop. Maintaining a professional image is one of the challenges of competing internationally. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how professionalism contributes to internationalization of SMEs. Several research studies on firm internationalization have examined the factors that contribute to firm internationalization. However, this study found a gap in the professional attitudinal dimensions assessment. Professional autonomy and professional commitment are the two attitudes, out of the five established by Kerr, Von Glinov, and Schriesheim (1977) taken into account in this study. The researchers assume that demonstrating these two attitudes would facilitate internationalization of SMEs. Moreover, the knowledge gained from this research would add to the current literature of SME internationalization.

1.1.1 Research Objectives

The main objective of the study is to explore a connection between SME internationalization and the two attitudinal dimensions of professionalism (professional autonomy and professional commitment). The study's specific objectives are as follows: 1. To establish how much professional autonomy contributes to internationalization of SMEs. 2. To determine the extent to which professional dedication contributes to internationalization of SMEs.

2.1 Literature Review

The structure of the review is based on the conceptual model developed by the researchers. In this study, SMEs were defined in the context of Nigeria, and professionalism defined as the entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and behavior required to facilitate international expansion as a growth strategy for sustainability. Kerr & Co. (1977) developed five professional attitudes that can be used to explore how scientists and engineers behave within their organizations in terms of professional conduct. The method is intended to assist researchers in thinking more creatively and systematically so that they can develop a new perspective on the professional behavior of Nigerian business owners during SME internationalization.

It focuses on two out of the five attitudinal dimensions of professionalism developed by Kerr et al. (1977). The underlying theory used is applied to formulate hypotheses so that there is a strong theoretical framework, as stated, according to the Academy of Management Journal (AMJ) Editors (Sparrowe and Mayer, 2011). The two-attitude dimensions of professionalism considered in this study are the independent variables (professional autonomy and professional commitment), while SME internationalization is the dependent variable.

Nigerian SMEs, according to the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the Small Medium, Enterprises Development Association of Nigeria (SMEDAN), are critical to economic transformation in Nigeria due to technological advancement, GDP contribution, export earnings, and value creation at the local level. As of 2013, small businesses contributed 17 percent and medium-sized businesses contributed 2 percent.

2.1.1 Professionalism and SME Internationalization

Professionalism is about how SME owners or managers operate with professional autonomy, master the required skills (professional commitment), and relate with fellow SME owners in the internationalization process. The study seeks to establish the assumed relationship between professionalism and internationalization of SMEs as a strategy for sustainable economic growth.

Hence, the researchers' concern is how to achieve the research objectives, which led to the formulation of the focal question 'To what extent will professional autonomy and professional commitment enhance SME internationalization?' Therefore, the main objective of the study, as stated in the beginning of the paper is to find out the extent to which the two attitudinal dimensions of professionalism will enhance SME internationalization.

2.1.2 The Attitudinal Dimensions of Professionalism

2.1.2.1 Professional autonomy - professional autonomy is a situation where professionals in an organization are free from normal routine behaviour which will prompt them to take action and also make fast decisions (Huber & Gartner, 2018).

2.1.2.2 Professional commitment – professional commitment is a concept that combines the understanding of people development, sense-making, and the combination of multi-tasking-related commitment, which goes beyond the boundaries of the organization. Furthermore, absence of it is linked to leaving the profession and also with the intention of leaving the organization (Tikare, 2017). It is something that reinforces the will of people to continue in the profession.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The researchers adopt a positivist stance (i.e., the philosophical approach); apply a deductive approach; use a survey strategy to collect data; analyse the data using a quantitative approach; the study is cross - sectional; and the collected data were analyzed using the non-parametric techniques and procedures. The researchers took a philosophical stance that helped them define the ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations that guided them throughout the research process (Morgan, 2014). As mentioned in the introduction of the paper, the study focuses on the realities that are challenges related to the success or otherwise of SMEs' internationalization.

3.2 Research Approach

The researchers applied the deductive style of reasoning, since the research was quantitative and based on scientific principles. In order to be clear, the constructs and concepts are operationalised in the research instrument and measured. The researchers adhered to strict codes of ethics during the research. The researchers used the survey strategy to collect data on Nigerian SMEs about who they are (demographics), and how they think (motivations and perceptions), and what they do (behaviour) (Balnaves & Caputi, 2021). The data were collected from SMEs across the six geo-political zones of

Nigeria about who they are, their perception of professionalism in the internationalization process of their businesses, and also investigated the mode of internationalization, if they have the intention.

First, a descriptive analysis is conducted for the variables and the tables are presented in tables and bar-graphs (in the original Ph.D Thesis), which gave a picture of the data and gave a picture of the data distribution. Second, a factor analysis conducted to test the variance/co-variance between the set of variables that are observed in the population of study, by the few unobserved Principal Component Analysis (PCA) further conducted to compress the large data into a state that enabled the researchers to capture the essence of the original data collected.

In addition, the Catell's scree tests were conducted, in which the eigenvalues of the factors were plotted to find the points for which the curves became horizontal, and the points above the elbow were retained (Pallant, 2013). The tests conducted are the Non-parametric tests (comprising Mann U Whitnet, Kruskal Wallis Tests, and the Median tests), considering the nature of the data, which were nominal (categorical) and ordinal (ranked) scales, thereby not meeting the conditions of the parametric techniques, which are considered more sophisticated (Pallant, 2013). The demographic tests were carried out as follows in the table below:

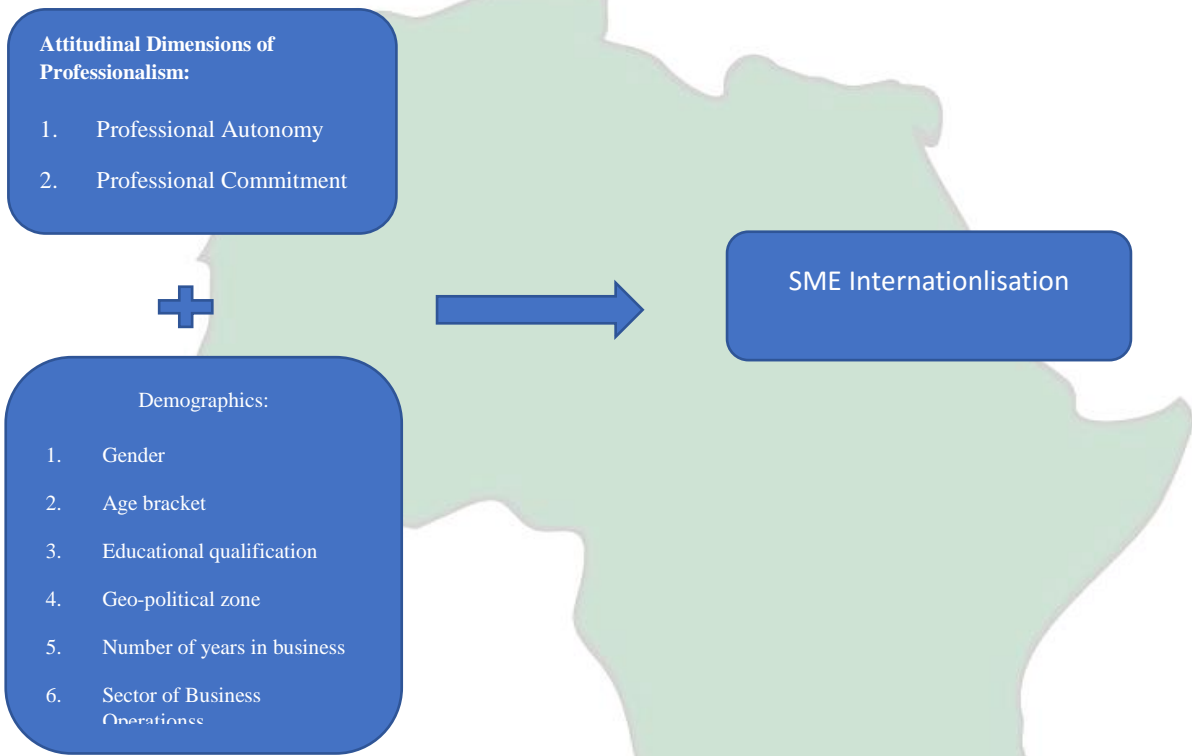
3.3 Methods and Analysis

Table 1: Tests Conducted on the Demographics

Variable	Type of Test
Gender	Mann-Whitney U Test (Ranks)
Age bracket	a. Kruskal-Wallis Test (Ranks) b. Median Test (Frequencies)
Educational qualification	a. Kruskal-Wallis Test (Rank) b. Median Test (Frequencies) c. Test Statistics
Geo-political zones	a. Kruskal-Wallis test (Ranks) b. Median Test c. Test Statistics
Number of years in business	a. Kruskal-Wallis Test (Ranks) b. Median Test (frequencies) c. Test Statistics

Sector of Business Operations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Kruskal-Wallis test (Ranks) b. Test Statistics (Chi-Square only) c. Median Test d. Test Statistics (Median and Chi-Square)
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3.4 Research Variables/Conceptual Framework



3.5 Sampling Technique

The researchers used the probability/representative sampling technique to address the research questions and research objectives. The sample is taken from the six geo-political zones of Nigeria, with one state selected as a representative state for each of the zones, as shown in the figure below (with the representative states in bold fonts)

Figure 1: The 36 (plus Abuja, which is the Federal Capital Territory - FCT) States of Nigeria According to the Six Geo-political Zones, with the Selected sampled states in bold

Nigeria’s Six Geo-Political Zones with States					
North-east	North-west	North-central	South-east	South-west	South-south
Adamawa	Jigawa	Benue	Abia	Ekiti	Akwa-Ibom

Bauchi	Kaduna	Kogi	Anambra	Lagos	Bayelsa
Borno	Kano	Kwara	Ebonyi	Ogun	Cross-river
Gombe	Katsina	Nasarawa	Enugu	Ondo	Delta
Taraba	Kebbi	Niger	Imo	Osun	Edo
Yobe	Sokoto	Plateau		Oyo	Rivers
	Zamfara	Abuja			

3.6 Sample Size Determination

The researchers adopted the method used by Saunders et al. (2011) to calculate the sample size, with 95% level of confidence, and a ‘z’ value of 1.65, and margin error of 5% to be tolerated and arrived at 365 SMEs, with ≥ 50 respondents from each of the six states.

3.7 Measurement Scale

The data for this study are nominal (categorical) and ordinal (ranked), which therefore made the researchers to use the five-point Likert scale, which is technically ordinal (Pallant, 2013). The researchers assigned values 1 – 5 to the options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Therefore, the non-parametric technique was used to analyse the data, which do not meet the condition for the other two measurement scale (interval and ratio). More so, the researchers conducted the Spearman correlation test, since ranking of data was used, instead of absolute values (Pallant, 2013). Basically, the researchers showed that there is a predictive relationship that can be exploited in business practice (professionalism in SME internationalization), and not show that one variable is causing the other to happen.

3.8 Suitability of Data for Factor Analysis

According to Tabachnick (Pallant, 2013), 300 cases are needed for factor analysis to be conducted, and this study had approximately 330 valid cases. The researchers inspected the correlation matrix to see if the coefficients are greater than .3 (assumption is that if greater than .3, factor analysis will not be suitable for the study). To assess the factorability of the data, the researchers tested the following measures:

- i. Bartlett’s test of sphericity (considered and appropriate when $p < 0.05$).

- ii. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO), with index of KMO ranging from 0 – 1, with .6 recommended as good enough.

The cases for the study showed suitability for factor analysis, and hence conducted in the section of analysis.

3.9 Assessing for the Validity

Validity concerns itself with measurement, and also gives researchers a sense of direction (Borsboom, Mellenbergh, & Heerden, 2004). Further, according to Balnaves & Caputi (2001), “Validity in quantitative research is the extent to which your measures do measure the constructs of interest to the research” (pg. 89). In this study, the researchers ensured the three main areas concerning validity (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001) were met:

- i. Construct validity – extent to which the constructs used were operationalized successfully, to represent the phenomenon under study;
- ii. Internal validity – extent to which the research design enables the researcher to conclude the relationships between the variables;
- iii. External validity – how the sample for the study represents the population genuinely

The researcher constructed a questionnaire that represented the reality of what was measured. Also, the researchers ensured, as recommended by Blumberg, Cooper, & Schindler (2008), that the validity of the questionnaire involved content validity; criterion validity, which is predictive and uses correlation analysis; and construct validity. Therefore, the researchers, in developing the scales for the study, checked for the evidence of construct validity that is acceptable (Schwab, 1980). Hence, the measures for professionalism in SME internationalization were developed and validated.

4.0 Analyses

4.1 Introduction

350 participants completed the questionnaires, and 330 were valid, and considered for analysis, as required to have an acceptable confidence level. The researchers achieved the high response rate, because of the moderate nature of the questionnaire, and also the follow up made on participants that did not fill the questionnaire immediately.

4.2 Normality Test

The data for this study did not meet the criteria for a normality test, because they were categorical and ordinal. Hence, they were tested using the non-parametric techniques, as recommended by Chan (2003).

4.2.1. Reliability/Consistency

The reliability test was conducted to check the level by which the scale was free from random error (Pallant, 2013). The reliability tests were conducted on a sample size of 330, with 324 being valid, and 6 excluded, all representing 98.2% and 1.8% respectively. The reliability statistics revealed a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.933, which falls above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Cohen, 1987). The number of items for the study were 33.

4.3 Principal Component Analyses

At least, 300 cases are needed to conduct a factor analysis (Pallant, 2013), and this study met the requirement, after having cases between 300 and 350. Further, Spearman's correlation matrices were presented for the independent variables (professional autonomy, professional commitment).

4.3.1 Factor Analysis for Professional Autonomy

The Spearman's correlations matrix for professional autonomy has four items of the five-point Likert-scale, and the coefficients were .3 and above, as recommended by Pallant (2013). The result showed 0.000s, signifying statistically significant relationships. The KMO and Bartlett's Test had a measure sampling adequacy value of .641, which is above the value of .6 as recommended by Pallant (2013), and the Bartlett's test having a significant value ($p = .000$), showing that the factor analysis was appropriate (Pallant, 2013). The Total Variance Explained/Scree plot had one component with an eigenvalue above 1, explaining 54.5% of the variance, hence the rotated component matrix table showed only one item was extracted, and thus could not be rotated.

4.3.2 Factor Analysis for Professional Commitment

The correlation matrix for professional commitment has five items that were tested using the five-point Likert scale, resulting to a correlation coefficient of .481, which is above the recommended value of .3 (Pallant, 2013). The correlations show positive relationships, as indicated by the 0.000s. For the KMO and Bartlett's Test, the result shows a value of .636 with a level significance ($p=.000$), thereby revealing that a PCA was appropriate (Pallant, 2013). Further, for Total Variance Explained/Scree Plot, the output was considered, as recommended by Keizer's criterion (Pallant, 2013). It showed an

eigen value of 1, explaining the values of 40 and 24 respectively, thereby showing a break after the second component. Component 1 has three items for professional commitment that load strongly, with values above 4 (as recommended by Pallant, 2013), while one item has low loading (below 4) on the one component. For component 2, three items load strongly, while one loads weakly with a value below 4. The solution was rotated, since two components were extracted, thereby suggesting that a two-factor is appropriate.

4.3.3 Non-Parametric Tests: Mann-Whitney Test

This is the alternative to the “One-way between-groups analysis of variance” (Pallant, 2013, p. 240). The researchers used it to compare the scores of the continuous variable for four age groups, which were converted to ranks, and subsequently the mean ranks for each groups compared. To get the Effect Size, the researchers calculated r values for the attitudinal dimensions of professionalism is 0.14. The test reveals that there is significant difference in the professional autonomy of males ($MR = 173.99$, $N = 199$) and females ($MR = 147.07$, $N = 127$), Mann-Whitney $U = 10549.500$, $z = -2.574$, $r = 0.14$ (considered a small effect).

4.3.4 Non-Parametric Tests: kruskal-Walis Test (Kruskal-Wallis H Test): Ranks of Attitudinal Dimensions of Professionalism/Age Groups

- **Professional Autonomy:** No statistical significant difference in PA between the different age groups.
- **Professional Commitment:** there is a statically significant difference in professional commitment between the different age groups.

4.3.5 Kruskal-Walis Test: Ranks of Attitudinal Dimensions of Professionalism/Edu. Qual.

- **Professional Autonomy:** there is statistically significant difference in professional autonomy between the different educational qualification groups.
- **Professional Commitment:** there is a statistically significant difference in the professional commitment between the different educational qualification groups.

4.3.6 Kruskal-Walis Test: Ranks of Attitudinal Dimensions on Professionalism/Geopolitical Zones

- **Professional Autonomy:** The test reveals a statistical difference in professional autonomy between the different geopolitical zones.
- **Professional Commitment:** The test reveals a statistically significant difference in professional commitment between the different geopolitical zones.

4.3.7 Kruskal-Walis Test: Ranks of Attitudinal Dimensions of Professionalism/Number of Years in Business

- **Professional Autonomy:** The test reveals there is no statistically significant difference in professional autonomy between the different groups of the number of years in business.
- **Professional Commitment:** The test reveals there is no statistically significant difference in professional commitment between the different groups of the number of years in business.

4.3.8 Kruskal-Walis Test: Ranks of Attitudinal Dimensions of Professionalism/Sector of Business Operations

- **Professional Autonomy:** The test reveals there is no statistically significant difference in professional autonomy between the different groups of the sector of business operations.
- **Professional Commitment:** The test reveals there is a statistically significant difference in professional autonomy between the different groups of sectors of business operations.

4.4 Hypotheses Tests for Attitudinal Dimensions of Professionalism on SME Internationalization

4.4.1 Hypothesis One

- **H₀:** There is no statistically significant relationship between professional autonomy and SME internationalization.
- **H₁:** There is a statistically significant relationship between professional autonomy and SME internationalization.
- **Result/Interpretation:** The Pearson Chi-square test reveals a value of 25.629, a degree of freedom (df) of 6, and p-value (asymptotic significance) of .000.
- **Decision Rule:** Based on the chosen confidence level of 95%, and margin error of 5% (.005), and p-value of .005, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis accepted.
- **Conclusion:** Since $p < .005$, we conclude that that there is a statistically significant association between professional autonomy and SME internationalization.

4.4.2 Hypothesis Two

- **H₀:** There is no statistically significant relationship between professional commitment and the internationalization process of SMEs.

- H_1 : There is a statistically significant relationship between professional commitment and the internationalization process of SMEs.
- **Result/Interpretation:** The Pearson Chi-square test in reveals a value of 29.221, a degree of freedom (df) of 6, and p-value (asymptotic significance) of .000.
- **Decision Rule:** The null hypothesis is rejected (since $p < .005$), based on the chosen confidence level of 95%, and 5% (.005) margin error.
- **Conclusion:** Since $p < .005$, we conclude that there is a statistically significant association between professional commitment and SME internationalization.

4.5 Research Findings

4.5.1 Research Finding One: Professional Autonomy (RQ 1)

The research objective one was formulated to explore how SMEs view professional autonomy, as an attitudinal dimension of professionalism that will enhance SME internationalization. To achieve it, the researchers asked the following question: To what extent does professional autonomy, as an attitudinal dimension of professionalism enhance SME internationalization. After a survey was conducted, the following findings were made:

- 1) Entrepreneurs view professional autonomy in SME internationalization as a state in which SMEs do international business without interference from the government.
- 2) Also, that staff of SMEs should be free to initiate business ideas that would be beneficial to the business firm, internationally.

Therefore, the researchers conclude that:

- 1) SMEs should grant professional autonomy to employees to enable them perform at optimum level, and thereby providing the needed goods and services in the international market. Further, the government should grant professional autonomy to SMEs to enable them operate in the international business environment without too much control.
- 2) SMEs should encourage and support the creativity and innovation exhibited by their employees, by granting them the desired level of professional autonomy at work.
- 3) The research objective have been met and the research question answered.

4.5.2 Research Finding Two: Professional Commitment (RQ 2)

Research objective two was set to find out what the role of professional commitment is in SME internationalization, as another attitudinal dimension of professionalism. Further, the researchers asked the question: To what extent does professional commitment play a role in SME internationalization? And to achieve the objective and also answer the research question, the researchers conducted a survey from which the responses of the respondents answered the questions as follows:

- 1) Professional commitment fosters the desire that entrepreneurs have for international trade policies made by the government.
- 2) It also enhances the delivery of quality service to the international contacts of the business.
- 3) Professional commitment develops the entrepreneur's interest in building a career in international business.

Hence, the researchers concluded that:

- 1) Entrepreneurs should make professional commitment a key element of success in the internationalization process of SMEs.
- 2) There should be constant monitoring of the quality of goods and services that are being offered to the international business contacts.
- 3) The research objective two has been achieved, and the research question answered.

4.6 Research Hypotheses (Support or Otherwise)

The researchers hypothesized that professional autonomy and professional commitment affect SME internationalization. The two hypotheses were tested to determine their level of significance, in relation

4.6.1 Hypothesis One for Professional Autonomy

The test statistic for hypothesis one reveals that there is a statistically positive relationship between professional autonomy and SME internationalization. It supports the works of previous scholars as follows:

First, it supports the assertion that in hot situations, employees can suspend the normal routine behaviour and take fast decisions (Huber & Gartner, 2018).

Second, managers need to collaborate with professionals, because professionals could be difficult to control and manage (Pepper, 2002).

Third, the study aligns with Pierce et. al., (1996)'s assertion that entrepreneurs (managers) should do their business with a sense of fulfillment, while employees should be satisfied doing their jobs.

Fourth, the result is in agreement with Scutariu (2014), who asserted that people need professional autonomy to enable them perform their duties effectively.

However, the result is at variance with assertions of other scholars as follows:

One, according to Marcus (1985), professional autonomy should be reduced to ensure the reduction of dubious practices, simplified decision rules, reformism, whistle blowing, and retreatism.

Two, a study by Heldal (2015b) shows that professional autonomy is often opposed by managers, and hence the need for collaboration between managers and employees.

4.6.2 Hypothesis Two for Professional Commitment

The result for hypothesis two reveals that there is a statistically significant relationship between professional commitment and SME internationalization. It supports previous studies cited in the paper, and also answer the research question. The studies supported are:

First, the study conducted by Tikare (2017) on professional nurses, whereby the study revealed that nurses (employees) should be professionally committed towards the needy patient's (customer's) health (satisfaction).

Second, Tikare (2017) further asserted that the lack of professional commitment means an intention by the employee to leave the profession.

Third, that professional commitment is a concept that is used to understand the attitudes and performance of employees (Cohen, 2003).

Fourth, the study by Voet et al. (2017), which revealed that professional commitment is crucial to the successful implementation of a planned organizational change that is related to employee commitment to change.

5.0 Policy Implications, Recommendations, and Suggestions for Future Research

5.1 Policy Implications

First, the attitudinal dimensions of professionalism have been discovered to be important predictors/factors of SME internationalization.

Second, SME internationalization in the future will be a process undertaken with the needed sense of professionalism.

Third, the application of these research recommendations by SMEs in Nigeria will make them be at par with their counterparts in the developed economies.

Last, the image of a country will be boosted positively, when the SMEs of such a country apply the attitudinal dimensions of professionalism in their internationalization process.

5.2 Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study was conducted through a survey, with consideration of the direct effect that the independent variables (professional autonomy and professional commitment) have on the dependent variable (SME internationalization). In the light of this, the researchers therefore, recommend that future researchers should consider the introduction of mediating variable (s) to determine the indirect effect. For example, a planned behaviour variable can be introduced to determine how it can mediate between the attitudinal dimensions of professionalism and SME internationalization.

Further, it was the initial intention of the researchers to determine economic sustainability, as an outcome of the effect of professionalism on SME internationalization, but due to the research limitations, it was not carried out. Hence, the researcher recommends that it should be considered for future research. Also, for the data analysis, the researchers used the non-parametric tests, which thereby gave limits to the power and sophistication of the normality of the data. As a result, the researchers recommend that future researchers should consider the use of parametric tests for analysis, since parametric tests are considered more powerful and less prone to statistical errors than non-parametric tests.

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