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Published Version

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Zahoor, N., Khan, Z., Meyer, M. and Laker, B. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0850-9744> (2023) International entrepreneurial behavior of internationalizing African SMEs - towards a new research agenda. Journal of Business Research, 154. 113367. ISSN 0148-2963 doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113367 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/107298/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113367>

Publisher: Elsevier

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International entrepreneurial behavior of internationalizing African SMEs – Towards a new research agenda

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

International entrepreneurial behavior

Internationalization

Africa

SMEs

International new ventures

Systematic review

ABSTRACT

Research on the international entrepreneurial behavior of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) originating from Africa has been receiving growing scholarly attention. Despite a proliferation of studies on the subject, the literature has hitherto remained fragmented, theoretically limited, and empirically inconclusive, thereby leaving important topics underexplored. This paper seeks to address this shortcoming through a systematic literature review aimed at critically analyzing and synthesizing 66 articles published in leading journals from 1995 to 2021. Our paper describes how research on the international entrepreneurial behavior of African SMEs has evolved over time, and identifies key gaps in the existing literature, thereby pointing at future avenues for research. By mapping descriptive findings in terms of methods, geography, and theoretical perspectives, we further develop an integrative framework suited to frame insights drawn from the current literature and offer important opportunities for future research on internationalizing SMEs originating from Africa.

1. Introduction

In volatile globalized market environments characterized by ever-evolving new business models and advanced technologies, organizations are more vulnerable to unpredictable external shocks. Moving beyond their domestic markets to explore and exploit any location-specific advantages available in international ones is becoming vital for both large and small firms to remain competitive (Debellis et al., 2021). Any organizational efforts made to expand into international markets also boost socio-economic prosperity and enable countries to recover from global crises (Mansion & Bausch, 2020). This is particularly valid in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are the most common type of business organizations (Child et al., 2017; Dabić et al., 2020), making up 90 % of all businesses and generating over 50 % of the total annual global GDP (World Bank, 2021). By matching these global statistics, African SMEs represent the backbone of the continent's economy, and provide 80 % of its employment (LSEG African Advisory Group, 2018). The internationalization activities of

SMEs originating from Africa have increased remarkably over the past two decades (Boso, Adeleye et al., 2019), suggesting that such firms are playing an increasing role in international markets. The post-2000 era, when the continent began to experience rapid economic growth, is denoted by the term 'Africa Rising' (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2018).

This development has been met with growing interest among international entrepreneurship scholars, who have been investigating the internationalization activities of African SMEs. Prior research argues that African SMEs experience challenges such as inefficient capital markets, limited capacity-building training opportunities, and the absence of any government-led strategies aimed at developing ecosystems (Atiase et al., 2018; Parente et al., 2019). Institutional voids—which take the form of weak intellectual property rights, corruption, bureaucracy, and red tape—tend to characterize the business environment of the African continent (Adomako et al., 2019; Adomako, Amankwah-Amoah, Debrah et al., 2021). In addition, there is a lack of institutional arrangements and support mechanisms suited to provide access to financial credit and market support for entrepreneurial

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activities and business development (Barasa et al., 2017; Parente et al., 2019). Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of enterprises operate in the formal as well as informal African economies (Zoogah et al., 2014). Baker and Nelson (2005, p. 33) suggested that African indigenous entrepreneurs are highly likely to make do “by applying combinations of resources at hand to new problems and opportunities.” In such a context, the role played by emerging technologies—including the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence, virtual platforms, and mobile applications—has been vital in enabling African SMEs to scale up their business models and conduct international business activities across the globe (Howell et al., 2018). These technological advancements enable greater integration in supply chains and efficient connections with foreign partners, and reduce physical distance, thereby extending the international reach of resource-constrained SMEs (Adomako, Amankwah-Amoah, Tarba et al., 2021; Knight & Liesch, 2016). Further, scholars have suggested that entrepreneurial attributes (e.g., passion, alertness, and orientation) enable African SMEs to overcome any domestic market constraints and enter into foreign markets (Adomako, Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2020; Kropp et al., 2008). Another group of studies emphasizes that strategic activities—such as investing in R&D, network relationships, and marketing efforts—facilitate the internationalization of African SMEs (Hammerschlag et al., 2020; Matanda et al., 2016; Okpara, 2009).

While many steps have been taken to advance research on Africa and permeate the boundaries of the international entrepreneurship research field, the scholarship on African SME internationalization has developed in a fragmented and disjointed way, both empirically and conceptually. Prior scholarly contributions on the internationalization of African SMEs vary in context, methodology, and theoretical perspectives. Moreover, the research conducted on the drivers, processes, and the outcomes of African SME internationalization has drawn insights from various fields (e.g., entrepreneurship, strategy, marketing, and innovation) with little consensus having been reached in regard to the nature and scope of such firms’ international business activities or on how these firms recognize international opportunities at their founding stage. The subsequent mixed findings suggest a lack of consistency in the theoretical underpinnings and empirical investigation of the internationalization process of African SMEs (Boso, Adeleye et al., 2019; Mahamadou, 2021). This is partially due to the unique nature of the African context, given the cultural, legal, political, and economic factors—which include trade sanctions by host countries, exchange control restrictions, geographic and cultural distances to markets, institutional voids, an inward-looking culture, and a lack of support from policymakers—hamper the economic development and outward internationalization of SMEs. Furthermore, these factors challenge the existing theories—e.g., the stage model—that predict that firms export to markets that are geographically close and culturally similar to their home ones (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). However, the situation in Africa is heterogeneous (e.g., South Africa), with the closest geographic markets sometimes being culturally dissimilar (Gimede, 2004; Kropp et al., 2008). Similarly, the resource-based view (RBV) assumes that a firm’s decision to engage in export activities is triggered by the quantity and quality of its internal resources (Barney, 1991). This notwithstanding, African SMEs are resource-constrained

and lack the external support needed to access financial capital, which often challenges the assumption of the RBV in the African context (Berko Obeng Damoah, 2018; Jekanyika Matanda, 2012). Given these multiple theoretical challenges, integrating the existing knowledge and identifying any promising research opportunities in the context of African internationalizing SMEs remains difficult.

Against such a background, in this study, we explore the heterogeneous yet evolving related research stream by performing a systematic literature review (SLR) aimed at investigating the state-of-the-art of the research related to the internationalization of SMEs from Africa. The SLR approach² enables researchers to identify, evaluate, and synthesize the extant research based upon focused review questions in a rigorous, transparent, holistic, and state-of-the-art manner (Butler et al., 2016; Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Tranfield et al., 2003). To this end, our aim was to answer the following three interrelated questions: “How has research on the international entrepreneurial behavior of African SMEs evolved over the years?”, “How do African SMEs achieve rapid internationalization?”, and “What future research avenues present themselves for African SME internationalization studies, in terms of the theoretical and empirical approaches?” We answered these questions by consolidating the research on the subject published over the last 27 years. Thus, by reviewing 66 articles published in high-impact journals in the area of African SME internationalization, this study offers unique insights due to its depth and length of coverage.

Our systematic literature review helped us to identify several knowledge gaps, with significant potential opportunities for future research. In so doing, our study makes several contributions. First, it provides a descriptive analysis of the field by presenting information on journal outlets, research disciplines, publication trends, methods employed, industry contexts, geographical foci, definitional issues, and theoretical perspectives. Second, it offers a thematic analysis by developing an integrative framework on antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes. Third, our integrated framework helped us to identify important knowledge gaps that may serve as a basis to offer guidance and suggestions for future research to scholars interested in studying the internationalization of SMEs originating from Africa.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we describe the methodology used to identify the sample articles. Then, we map the international entrepreneurship research conducted in the African context by providing a descriptive summary of the literature. Next, we introduce and develop an integrative framework suited to synthesize the previous literature’s findings. Finally, we provide recommendations for future research to advance the field.

2. Methodology

We conducted a SLR because, compared to traditional ones, it was better suited to enhance the rigor, validity, and generalizability of the findings (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). Further, a SLR can provide practical and robust answers to focused review questions (Mallett et al., 2012). Thus, we deemed a SLR to be appropriate to consolidate and analyze the evidence on the internationalization of African SMEs. To carry out our SLR, we followed the recommendations made by Denyer

² SLRs have gained favor over traditional ones due to the notion that they are characterized by enhanced rigor, validity, and generalizability (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). They are effective in offering practical and robust answers to focused review questions (Mallett et al., 2012). Also, they have gained popularity over meta-analysis, which is based on statistical analysis aimed at summarizing the results of previous studies, with limited emphasis on the identification of gaps and on the provision of future research directions. SLRs are beneficial for both researchers and practitioners, as they are based on pre-defined eligibility criteria, a reproducible methodology, systematic search, the systematic presentation and synthesis of the findings, and the identification of promising avenues for future research.

and Tranfield (2009).

2.1. Review scope and boundaries

We determined the scope and boundaries of our SLR based on four inclusion/exclusion criteria: (1) type of publications; (2) time horizon; (3) search boundaries; and (4) keywords. First, we set a parameter to emphasize academic journal articles published in the English language, thus excluding non-academic materials—such as books, book chapters, editorials, and commentaries (Debellis et al., 2021; Nolan & Garavan, 2016). We followed previous high impact review studies (Purkayastha & Kumar, 2021; Soto-Simeone et al., 2020; Zahoor et al., 2020) by including articles listed in the Chartered Association of Business Scholars' (CABS) 2021 Academic Journal Guide. By adopting this strategy, we were able to locate those journals that are recognized by the scientific community in various knowledge fields (Okwir et al., 2018; Zahoor & Al-Tabbaa, 2020). To ensure a comprehensive SLR, we considered all the journals listed in the CABS guide (i.e., those ranked 1, 2, 3, and 4) (Bolt et al., 2022; Heinis et al., 2022); however, our focus remained on those outlets that were ranked 2 or higher (see Table 1). We also focused on empirical articles in the context of Africa, thereby excluding any conceptual papers and other empirical articles focused on non-African contexts. Second, we reviewed the empirical papers published between 1995 and 2021. This enabled us to cover a broad range of literature published over the years (Paul & Criado, 2020). We selected 1995 as our starting point because that was when research on the internationalization of African SMEs initially emerged (Calof & Viviers, 1995). Moreover, this was close to the Africa Rising era, which led to rapid economic growth and to the international expansion of SMEs. Third, we set our search boundary to be the Web of Science™ platform, which contains bibliographic information on over 50 disciplines (Schmitt et al., 2018). To ensure a full coverage of articles, we combined the Web of Science™ platform with Scopus, which is a comprehensive database of peer-reviewed literature. Thus, the Web of Science and Scopus could be considered to provide a complementary interdisciplinary coverage of published articles (Jung & Orr, 2021; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Finally, the literature scoping enabled us to identify three roots for our keywords: 'internationalization', 'SMEs', and 'Africa'. The variations of 'internationalization' included 'international venturing', 'exporting', 'international market entry', and 'foreign market entry'; those of 'SMEs' consisted of 'small and medium-sized enterprises', 'SMEs', 'small enterprises', 'small firms', 'small ventures', 'international new ventures', 'new ventures', 'born global', and 'international entrepreneurship'; and the key terms linked to 'Africa' included 'Northern Africa', 'Eastern Africa', 'Middle Africa', 'Southern Africa', and 'Western Africa'. We combined the keywords in each category to create search strings using a Boolean operator. For instance, 'internationalization' was combined with 'SMEs' and 'Africa' to create a search string.

2.2. Identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies

Using the pre-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria outlined in previous section, we identified, screened, and selected the relevant studies in four key stages (see Fig. 1). In stage 1, we conducted a keyword search in the Web of Science and Scopus databases to sift through topics and titles and identify the relevant research published between 1995 and 2021. This returned 296 articles. We imported these articles into the EndNote X9 Bibliometric software for further filtration in subsequent stages. In stage 2, we used the EndNote X9's 'Find Duplicates' function and removed 34 duplicates. This reduced the original 296 articles to 262. Next, we screened the articles by selecting only those that had been published in CABS-ranked journals, which further reduced our sample to 105 articles. In stage 3, we retrieved the full texts of the remaining articles and read them. We then discarded any articles that did not meet the following criteria: 1) the search terms had been used in a way that

Table 1
Journals included in the sample.

Journal name	CABS journal ranking	Number of papers
<i>Entrepreneurship and Small Business</i>		
1. Journal of Business Venturing	4	1
2. Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice	4	1
3. International Small Business Journal	3	3
4. Journal of Small Business Management	3	5
5. Entrepreneurship & Regional Development	3	2
6. Small Business Economics	3	1
7. International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research	3	1
8. The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation	2	1
9. Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	2	5
10. Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship	1	1
<i>International Business and Area Studies</i>		
11. Journal of International Management	3	2
12. International Business Review	3	3
13. Management International Review	3	1
14. Thunderbird International Business Review	2	6
15. critical perspectives on international business	2	3
16. Journal of Transnational Management	1	1
<i>General management</i>		
17. Journal of Business Research	3	4
<i>Innovation</i>		
18. Technovation	3	1
19. Technological Forecasting and Social Change	3	2
<i>Marketing</i>		
20. International Marketing Review	3	6
21. Industrial Marketing Management	3	3
22. Journal of International Marketing	3	1
23. European Journal of Marketing	3	1
24. Journal of Strategic Marketing	2	1
<i>Economics</i>		
25. Journal of International Development	2	1
26. International Journal of Social Economics	1	1
<i>Strategy</i>		
27. Strategic Change	2	1
<i>Information management</i>		
28. Journal of Internet Commerce	1	1
<i>Human Resource Management & Employment</i>		
29. Human Resource Management	4	1
<i>Operations and Technology</i>		
30. International Journal of Operations and Production Management	4	1
<i>Regional Studies, Planning and Environment</i>		
31. Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	1	1
<i>Ethics, CSR, Management</i>		
32. Management Decision	2	2
33. Competition and Change	2	1
Total		66

did not match our review focus (e.g., the term 'venture' had been used to refer to as venture capital investment); 2) one of the search terms was missing (e.g., the internationalization of African firms, but not focused on SMEs or the internationalization of SMEs, but not in the African context); and 3) there were no theoretical insights on the internationalization of African SMEs. After a comprehensive assessment of the published material, we decided to include 62 of the remaining 105 articles in the review process. In stage 4, we hand-searched the 62 articles by checking their reference lists. This led us to include four further articles that had not matched our original keyword search. Our final sample, and the basis of our SLR, thus consisted of 66 articles.

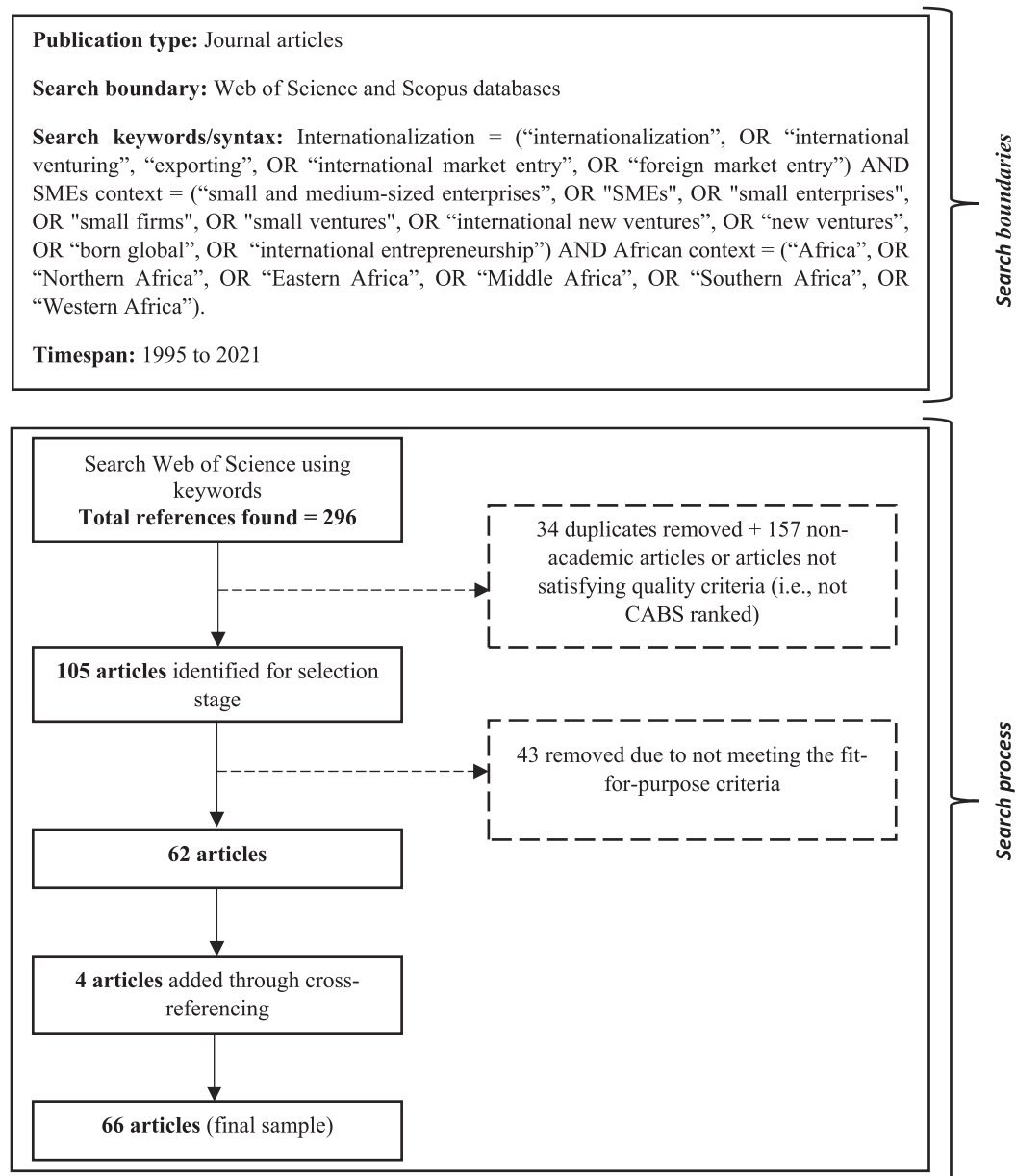


Fig. 1. Study identification, screening, and selection process.

2.3. Analysis and synthesis

To extract the information from our 66 sample articles, we took a two-tiered approach—i.e., bibliometric and qualitative content analyses—(Luo et al., 2019). The bibliometric analysis helped us to recognize the descriptive patterns along the spatial and temporal dimensions. We prepared an Excel data extraction sheet to organize the features of the sample studies, such as publication outlet, publication year, author(s) geographic location, theoretical approach, methodology, geographical scope, and key findings (Vrontis & Christofi, 2021; Zahoor & Al-Tabbaa, 2020). We then performed a qualitative content analysis to identify any key research themes and sub-themes by paying attention to contents and arguments (e.g., Zhao et al., 2021). This method, which had been used in previous review studies (Debellis et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2021), involved repetition and multiple coding cycles (Schreier, 2012). The coding scheme is a critical aspect of qualitative content analysis (Gaur & Kumar, 2018). To help synthesize the research on the internationalization of African SMEs, we applied the antecedents-mediators-outcomes (AMO) framework (Agostini & Nosella, 2017; Martineau & Pastoriza,

2016).

3. Descriptive analysis of the literature

Our review of the literature on the internationalization of African SMEs yielded various trends. This section reports the findings in relation to the publication trends, methods applied, industrial and geographical contexts, and theoretical perspectives, which served to map the existing literature and identify any gaps that could offer opportunities for future research.

3.1. Journal outlets and research disciplines

Table 1 shows the journals and number of papers on which we conducted our review. It is evident that the highest numbers of articles had been published in International Marketing Review (6), Thunderbird International Business Review (6), Journal of Small Business Management (5), Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development (5), Journal of Business Research (4), International Small Business Journal

(3), International Business Review (3), Industrial Marketing Management (3), and Critical Perspectives on International Business (3). Despite the burgeoning research on the internationalization of African SMEs, only a few articles on the subject had been published in top-rated entrepreneurship and small business journals (i.e., ranked 4 in the CABS list), with the two such entrepreneurship journals in our sample—Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice and Journal of Business Venturing—having only published one article each. Further, although international business journals had published studies on the internationalization of African SMEs, research in the top-rated international business journals was found to remain largely missing.

We observed that the highest numbers of articles in our review sample had been published in Entrepreneurship and Small Business (21), International Business and Area Studies (16), and Marketing (12). Fig. 2 further suggests that the topic of our study had received attention from various disciplines, including Regional Studies, Planning and Environment, Ethics, CSR, Management, and Economics, among others.

3.2. Publication trends, methods employed, and industry focus

The number of articles on the internationalization of African SMEs published from 1995 to 2021 are illustrated in Fig. 3. A single incidental article had been published in 1995, then none until 2001. After 2001, a growing publication trend was observed. About eight articles had been published between 2002 and 2007. For the 2008–2016 period, 18 articles had been published, a 225 % increase from the previous years. This growing trend can be explained by the 2008 economic recession, which had led to free economies and growing international trade (Liou & Rao-Nicholson, 2017). Articles were then published every year—for a total of 39, almost two-thirds of our sample articles—between 2017 and 2021; a 217 % increase from the previous years. This lends credence to our belief that the international entrepreneurial behavior of African SMEs is of high interest to the scholars. Moreover, these findings support the need for a systematic review of this topic to integrate and advance the growing field of the internationalization of SMEs originating from Africa.

The empirical articles in our review sample used diverse methodologies. The dominating one was the quantitative method (51), which was based either on survey data (45) or secondary ones (6). Within these survey-based studies, the response size ranged from 40 to 500 questionnaires with a response rate of 2.3 % to 97.6 %. Further, to avoid any common method bias issue, some of the survey studies had used multi-informant data (6) and multi-time frame ones (8). The quantitative data analysis ranged from simple forms, such as descriptive (6) and regression analysis (22), to complex ones, including structural equation modeling (17), Smart PLS (4), PROCESS macro (1), fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (1), and cluster analysis (1). Some studies had used the qualitative method (12) based on multiple case (9), single case (2), and comparative case studies (1). The analysis was mostly conducted manually (10) with some exceptions based on NVivo (2). There were only three mixed-method studies in our review sample.

In terms of the industry context, most of our sample articles were focused on the manufacturing (26), manufacturing and services (14), and multiple sectors (15). A small number of studies (11) were focused on a single industry sector, such as textile, food production, food processing, software, and Fintech.

3.3. The geographical context of the studies and author(s) information

The articles were classified based on the geographical context of the empirical research. The studies had been conducted in 24 different countries within Africa. Most of them were focused on a single country

(49), followed by two (6), three (3), and four or more countries (8). In terms of the region, Western Africa received the most attention (30) followed by Eastern Africa (17), Southern Africa (15), Northern Africa (13), and Middle Africa (5)³. Fig. 4 further illustrates the countries on which the sample of empirical studies in our review were focused. The most prominent among them were Ghana (19), South Africa (13), Nigeria (8), Algeria (6), Tunisia (4), and Tanzania (4). This finding suggests the research potential of other, under-represented countries in different regions of Africa as well as of cross-national comparative research on the internationalization of SMEs.

Moreover, our findings revealed that our sample articles had been authored by 202 scholars from 26 different countries. The geographic location of the first authors (Fig. 5) suggests that most contributions had been by authors based in the UK (30), the USA (8), and Australia (4). Further, Table 2 highlights how only a small number of sample articles had been authored by single researchers (10), whereas most had been authored by teams. Also, 61 % of our sample articles had been produced by individuals or by teams based in single countries, compared to 23 % by teams based in two, 15 % in three, and 2 % in four countries or more. This finding is surprising, given that conducting research on the internationalization of African SMEs, as a phenomenon, requires collaborative efforts. Thus, it can be argued that fruitful grounds remain for global research collaborations.

3.4. Type of firms and definitions

Most sample articles were found to deal with SMEs based in different African countries but with an international focus (58). We also identified a small number of articles focused on new ventures (7) and born-globals (1). Although SMEs, new ventures, and born-globals share the characteristics of being small and resource-constrained (Rodríguez-Serrano & Martín-Armario, 2019), SMEs often follow gradual internationalization processes. These may begin in foreign markets close to their domestic ones, as opposed to international new ventures and born-globals, which start their international operations from their inception (Knight & Liesch, 2016; Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019) and derive significant sales from their international business activities. As past research has omitted to compare internationalizing SMEs and rapidly internationalizing new ventures and born-global firms, this could be a fruitful area of research for future studies investigating the internationalization patterns of entrepreneurial African firms. For our study, in line with Oviatt and McDougall (2005) and Knight and Cavusgil (2004), we defined ‘rapidly internationalizing small firms’ as those new ventures that engage in international business at or near their founding or inception stage and which derive substantial sales from international markets. Scholars have also suggested that such firms derive at least 25 % of their total sales from international business activities within six years of their inception (cf. Shrader et al., 2000).

As the definition of SMEs is variously based on numbers of employees, revenues, or both (Child et al., 2022), we checked for the use of the numbers of employees criterion in the studies in our sample (Abubakar et al., 2019; Assadinia et al., 2019). We noticed that the maximum employee number criterion threshold used in our sample studies had varied among African countries. The studies conducted in Swaziland and Ethiopia had classified as SMEs those firms with a maximum of 100 employees (Birru et al., 2019; Obben & Magagula, 2003), whereas those focused on Ghana and Uganda had considered an upper limit of 250 (Adomako, Frimpong et al., 2020; Ahimbisibwe et al., 2020; Boso et al., 2012). A maximum threshold of 300 employees had been used in the context of the Ivory Coast research (Mahamadou, 2021), while, in that of Algeria, a maximum of 500 employees had been used as the SME threshold (Haddoud et al., 2021; Haddoud et al., 2019). We also noticed

³ The total number is greater than 66 as some studies had considered more than one country.

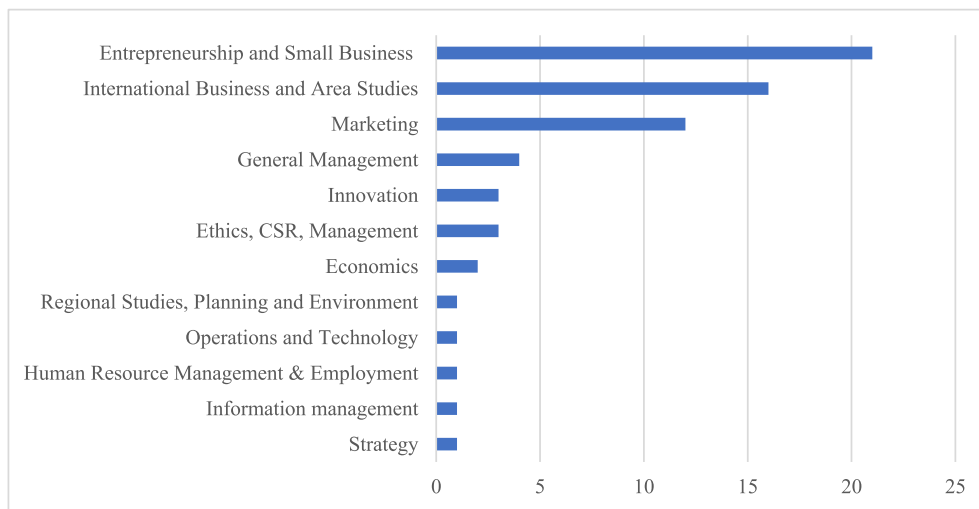


Fig. 2. Research discipline based on publication outlets.

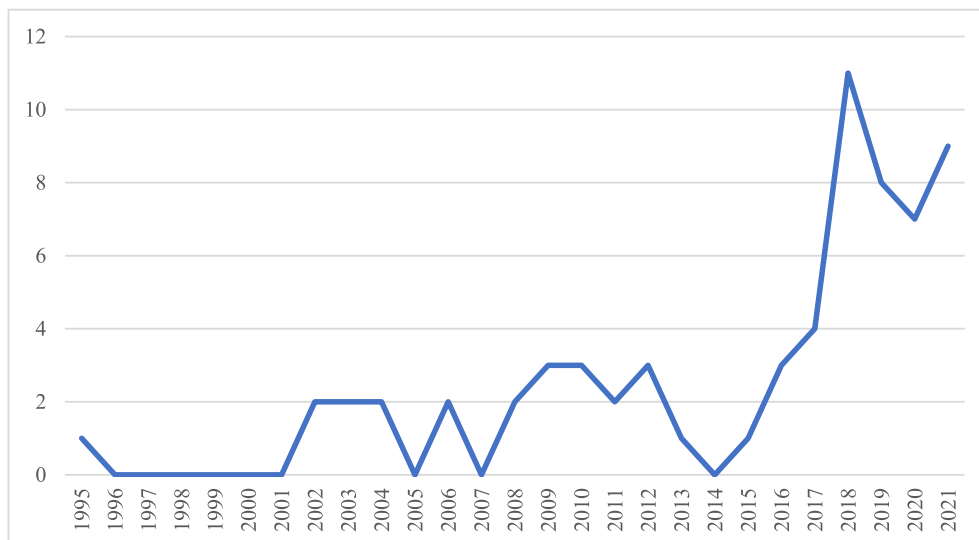


Fig. 3. Number of papers from 1995 to 2021.

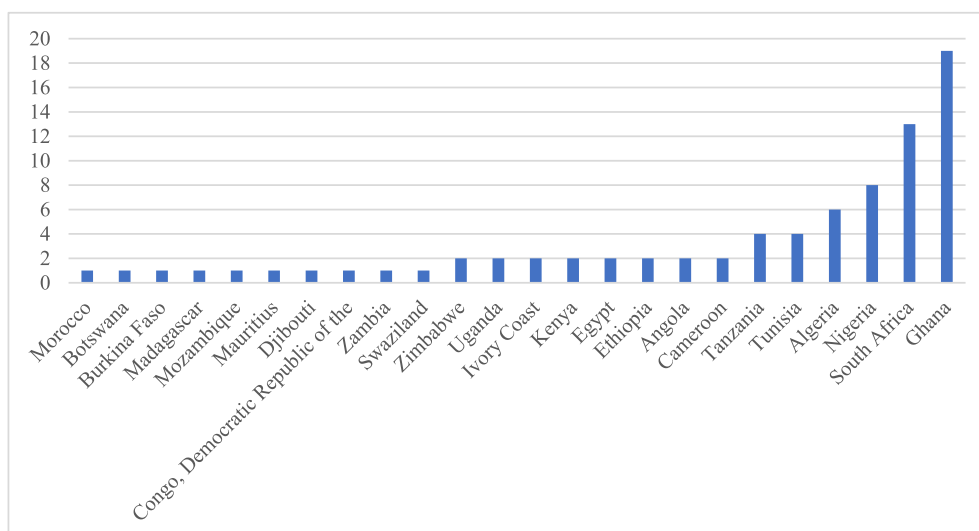


Fig. 4. The geographical locations of the sample articles.

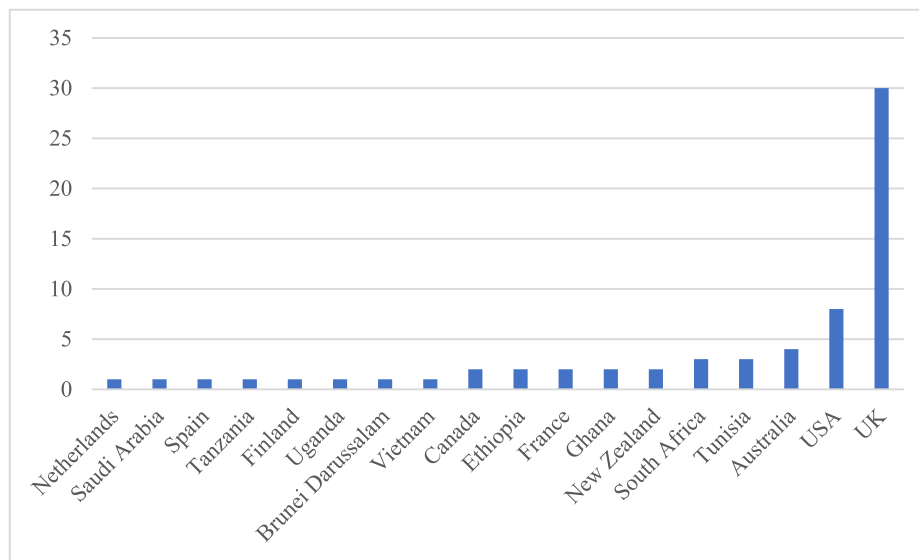


Fig. 5. The geographical locations of the authors.

Table 2
Authorship analysis of the sample articles.

Number of authors	Quantity	Percentage
One	10	15.15
Two	15	22.73
Three	19	28.79
Four or more	22	33.33
Number of authors	Quantity	Percentage
One	40	60.61
Two	15	22.73
Three	10	15.15
Four or more	1	1.52

a degree of inconsistency between the maximum number of employees' criterion used in a single country. For example, in the Nigerian context, some studies had used a threshold of 250 employees (Assadinia et al., 2019; Boso et al., 2018), while others had adopted a cut-off point of 500 (Okpara, 2009). This inconsistency in the number of employees criterion, which can be related to the lack of a common definition of SME adopted in the African region, requires future scholarly efforts to compare the internationalization processes of micro enterprises with fewer than 100 employees and SMEs with 100 and more.

3.5. Theoretical perspectives

As the literature on the international entrepreneurial behaviors of African SMEs developed, scholars began to take more robust theoretical perspectives to examine the internationalization process of such firms. The most prominent among such perspectives include the RBV, the knowledge-based view (KBV), network theory, relational exchange theory, and institutional theory.

The RBV, as a largely accepted theory in examining the internationalization of African SMEs, posits that a firm's competitive advantage stems from its unique and inimitable resources (Barney, 1991). By adopting the RBV, studies have examined how the possession of different resources affects African SME internationalization. For example, research shows that the experience of the founding team, entrepreneur age, entrepreneur education, and export-oriented owners/managers can drive the international behaviors of African SMEs (Khavul et al., 2012; Okpara, 2009; Robson & Freel, 2008). Moreover, African SMEs can utilize their own resources—including international experience, technological resources, marketing capabilities, and learning

orientation—to drive their own internationalization (Boso et al., 2017; Haddoud, Beynon et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2011). Any lack of informational and functional resources can adversely negatively affect African SMEs' entrepreneurial behaviors in relation to their expansion into international markets, and thereby reduce their international intensity (Haddoud, Onjewu et al., 2018). As an extension of the RBV, some studies have drawn insights from the KBV, which suggests that knowledge is a generic resource suited to provide a competitive advantage (Grant, 1996). Prior research using the KBV suggests that, when African SMEs possess technological, market, and internationalization knowledge, they can develop innovation to gain footholds in foreign markets (Adomako, Amankwah-Amoah, Danso et al., 2021; Mejri et al., 2018).

While the RBV describes the uniqueness of African SMEs' resources, it does not consider their unique characteristics in terms of limited resources and smallness (Nason & Wiklund, 2015), as well as the characteristics of their management teams in relation to their internationalization. Therefore, previous research has advanced the literature on the internationalization of African SMEs by using network theory (Johanson & Mattsson, 1988), according to which, internationalization is a function of a firm's network relationships. African SMEs build value-adding relationships that enable them to minimize the disadvantages of isolation and smallness and to mitigate the challenges associated with expanding into unknown and distant markets (Amoako & Matlay, 2015; Kujala & Törroos, 2018). The extension and penetration of network relationships with friends, foreign associations, foreign distributors, and local producers facilitate and expand the scope of the entry of African SMEs into international markets (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2020; Rutashobya & Jaensson, 2004). However, to enhance the effectiveness of their networks in the turbulent markets of Africa and beyond, internationalizing SMEs need to adopt governance mechanisms suited to create and sustain their competitive advantage. In this regard, relational exchange theory asserts that African SMEs can utilize trust (e.g., competency, contractual, and goodwill) and commitment (e.g., affective and calculative) to effectively generate value from their network relationships to the end of promoting their international venturing (Matanda & Freeman, 2009; Matanda et al., 2016).

The RBV and network theory help explain the internationalization of African SMEs, with the former emphasizing internal resources and the latter external ones. However, both perspectives neglect the idiosyncratic challenges related to dealing with the African institutional context (Peprah et al., 2021). African countries often perform poorly in relation to upholding regulatory quality, the rule of law, corruption control, and government effectiveness (Barasa et al., 2017; Littlewood & Holt, 2015).

As such, institutional theory has logically been a key theoretical framework, as it focuses on contextual factors, which include country- and environment-specific factors, to explain international entrepreneurial behavior (Pfeffer, 1993; Scott, 1995). Based on institutional theory, scholars contend that domestic institutional voids promote the international learning efforts of African SMEs, leading to their increased internationalization (Adomako et al., 2019). Also, regulatory, cognitive, and normative institutional impediments, among others, increase domestic environmental uncertainty in Africa, ultimately encouraging SMEs to expand into international markets (Adomako, Frimpong et al., 2020). Moreover, within institutionally weak environments, African SMEs exploit indigenous institutions and network relationships to achieve internationalization (Narooz & Child, 2017; Omeihe et al., 2021).

Apart from these widely used theories, we noticed that our review sample studies had drawn from various other ones, such as upper echelons theory, decision-making theory, stakeholder theory, and transaction cost economics. Upper echelons theory argues that the strategic decision to internationalize is predicted by managerial characteristics (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). We noticed that this theory had been used to study the effect of the CEOs' levels of prevention and promotion focus on the degree of internationalization of African SMEs (Adomako, Frimpong, Mohammed et al., 2021). Decision-making theory assumes that rapid decision-making can act as an asset to offset any resource constraints and achieve a competitive advantage (Eisenhardt, 1989). Research conducted through the lens of decision-making theory suggests that the strategic decision-making of African SMEs enables them to overcome any market constraints and exploit their resource flexibility to achieve internationalization (Adomako, Frimpong, Amankwah-Amoah

et al., 2021; Adomako, Frimpong, Mohammed et al., 2021). Transaction cost economics assumes that a firm, its products, and its environment are related to transactions that determine the choice of international entry mode (Buckley & Casson, 1998; Hennart, 1991). When African markets fail and products become more complex, SMEs tend to integrate and assume greater control, thereby preferring the direct exporting mode over the indirect one (Khemakhem, 2010; Tajeddin & Carney, 2018).

4. The thematic analysis of the literature

We critically analyzed and synthesized the findings of our review sample studies into an integrative framework (Fig. 6). This framework contains information on four categories: the antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes of the internationalization of African SMEs. In the following section, we explain the outcomes that are considered in the literature on the internationalization of African SMEs. Next, we discuss the first stream of research—antecedents-outcomes—which focuses on the direct effects of antecedents on outcomes. This is followed by the explanation of the second stream—antecedents-mediators-outcomes—which considers the impact of antecedents on outcomes through mediating mechanisms.

4.1. Outcomes: the literature on the international entrepreneurial behaviors of African SMEs

Outcomes are the consequences of antecedents and mediators. Research on outcomes has received significant scholarly attention and

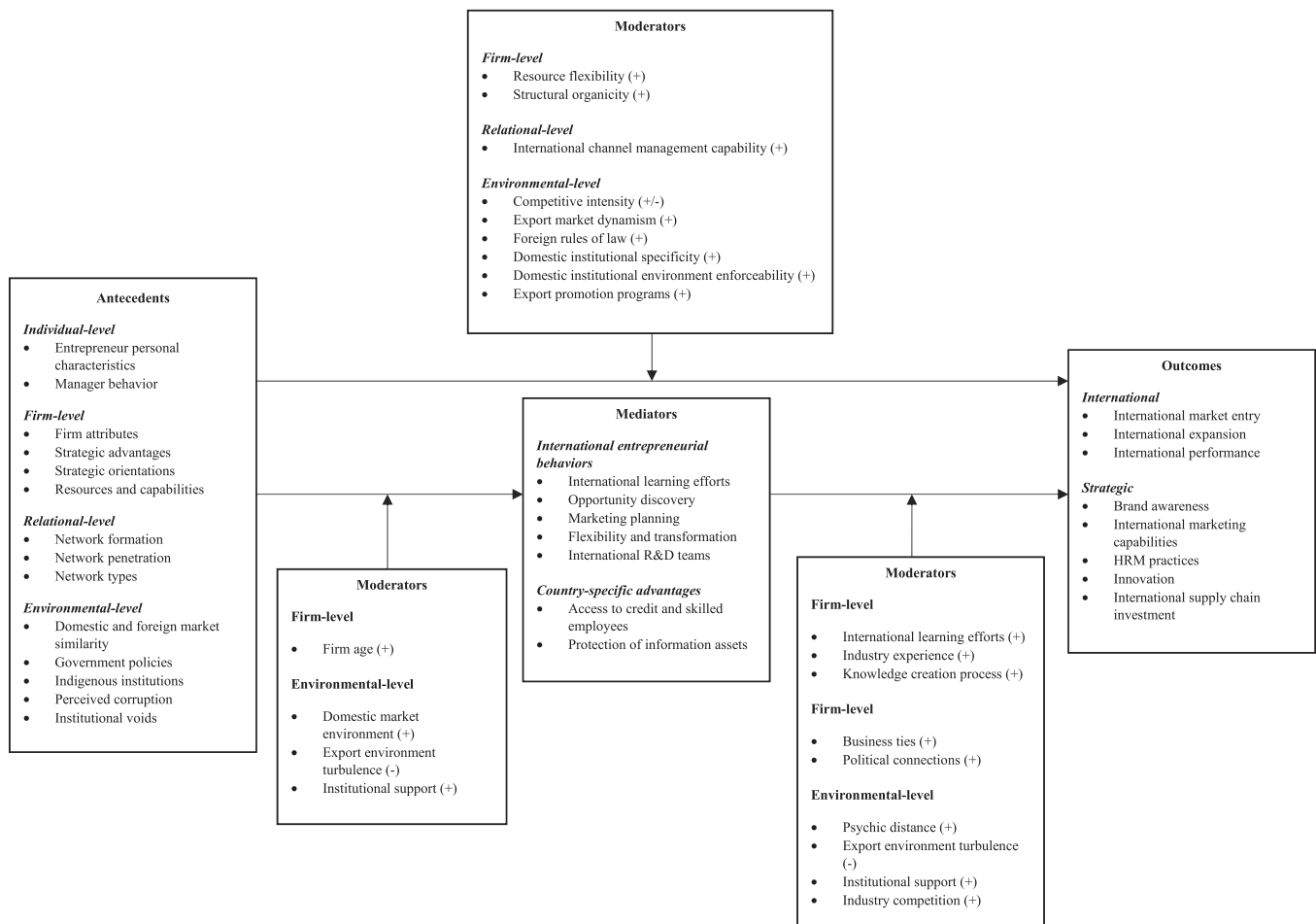


Fig. 6. An integrative framework of literature on African SMEs' internationalization.

has considered a variety of factors—e.g., export intensity, export propensity, human resource management (HRM), and so on. We grouped these into two distinct yet related groups: internationalization outcomes and strategic outcomes.

Internationalization outcomes relate to the foreign market entry processes and competitive gains that African SMEs achieve in international markets (Berko Obeng Damoah, 2018). In this category, our analysis yielded different outcome types, including international market entry, international expansion, and international performance. First, *international market entry* relates to the export intentions, export propensities, and modes of foreign entry of SMEs from African regions. In regard to export intentions, scholars argued that some African non-exporters are prompted to enter foreign markets due to their managerial characteristics (Haddoud et al., 2021; Kropp et al., 2008). Relatedly, some of our sample studies considered export propensity by conceptualizing it as whether or not an African SME engaged in exporting (Gomes et al., 2018; Gumede & Rasmussen, 2002; Obben & Magagula, 2003). Once an African SME decides to internationalize, different entry modes are available to it (Brouthers & Hennart, 2007). Research suggests that African SMEs mostly adopt direct exporting mode to avoid suppliers and other intermediaries (Khemakhem, 2010). Others argued that the optimism of senior managers/entrepreneurs encourages African SMEs to adopt the equity entry mode—including greenfield investments, acquisitions, and wholly owned subsidiaries (Adomako, Frimpong, Mohammed et al., 2021; Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2022).

Second, *international expansion* is defined as the speed, scope, and degree of the internationalization of African SMEs. In relation to speed, our sample studies were found to suggest that some African firms, known as born-globals and international new ventures, internationalize soon after their inception (Goncalves & Smith, 2019). In conceptualizing these firms, our sample scholars had considered a timeframe of less than 10 years as the criterion for them to be regarded as born-globals and international new ventures (Adomako et al., 2019; Donbesuur, Boso et al., 2020). However, other firms—SMEs—expand into domestic markets and gain the resources that help them to internationalize (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2020). The international scope is the territorial spread of African SMEs. While some studies were found to argue that SMEs expand within the African region (Boso et al., 2017; Chowdhury, 2006; Soontjens, 2002), others were found to have focused on the expansion of African SMEs into international markets across diverse global regions (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2020; Khavul, Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2010). Degree of internationalization is conceptualized as the scale of the sales that African SMEs derive from their operations in foreign markets (Adomako, Amankwah-Amoah, Tarba et al., 2021; Adomako, Frimpong et al., 2020).

Third, *international performance* relates to a SME's achievement of its internationalization objectives in terms of profitability, sales, and market share (Crick et al., 2011; Kropp et al., 2006), production of goods and services for foreign customers (Appiah et al., 2019), and regularity of exports (Haddoud et al., 2019). This was the most prominent outcome category found in our review sample (Boso et al., 2018; Njinyah, 2018). However, most of the studies had involved subjective measures of international performance (Assadinia et al., 2019; Matanda & Freeman, 2009; Olabode et al., 2018) with some scholars adopting objective ones such as international sales revenues (Edeh et al., 2020; Tajeddin & Carney, 2018). The limited use of objective data can be due to lack of a comprehensive database on the international venturing of African SMEs.

Strategic outcomes concern the advantages attained by a firm as a result of its international business activities. Despite this category's importance and the potential to be influenced by international venturing, limited scholarly attention was found to have been devoted to it. Prior research shows that involvement in international markets enables African SMEs to achieve strategic performance in terms of building brand awareness, accessing new technologies, and improving market response (Birru et al., 2019) as well as international marketing activities (Masango & Lassalle, 2020). Khavul, Benson et al. (2010) argued that,

by internationalizing, African SMEs are encouraged to invest in the HRM practices of recruiting, hiring, training, and motivating employees. Moreover, product and process innovation are also outcomes of African SMEs' exporting activities (Abubakar et al., 2019). Moreover, the international orientation of African SMEs encourages them to invest in international supply chains (Khavul et al., 2012).

4.2. Stream 1: antecedents–outcomes (direct effect and moderators)

The vast majority of our sample studies (48) was found to have paid attention to the factors (i.e., antecedents) that directly influence the outcomes of African internationalizing SMEs (Fig. 6). Within this category, various antecedents were identified—such as entrepreneurial attributes, firm resources and capabilities, and African market characteristics. We clustered these antecedents into four categories: individual-, firm-, relation-, and environment-level.

Individual-level antecedents relate to the attributes of entrepreneurs or managers that can trigger the internationalization of African SMEs. These attributes range from the personal characteristics of entrepreneurs (e.g., age, experience, and language) to managers propensities (e.g., risk-takers or dispositional optimists). First, in regard to *personal characteristics*, the findings of our sample studies show that those African SMEs the decision-makers of which speak foreign languages can achieve better international performance than those with monolingual ones (Obben & Magagula, 2003). Further, younger managers are more energetic and take greater risks than older ones, and therefore tend to seek international opportunities (Haddoud et al., 2021). However, Robson and Freel (2008) argued that older entrepreneurs can drive the internationalization of African SMEs because they can leverage their experience in export markets. Further, male-owned African SMEs can achieve higher export success than female-owned ones (Robson & Freel, 2008). Research also suggests that managers' knowledge of foreign markets can reduce international market uncertainties and promote the internationalization of African SMEs (Khavul, Benson et al., 2010). Second, research on *manager's behaviors* suggests that those managers who are highly optimistic and possess a high tolerance for risks prefer the equity mode of entry (Adomako, Frimpong, Mohammed et al., 2021; Khemakhem, 2010). In addition, the regulatory focus of managers can determine the degree of internationalization, with promotion-focused managers wanting to achieve higher social status and supporting a degree of internationalization, and prevention-focused ones wanting to avoid any pain and losses, and therefore discouraging internationalization (Adomako et al., 2017).

Firm-level antecedents are those characteristics of African SMEs that are conducive to internationalization. These factors include firm attributes, strategic advantages, strategic orientation, and resources and capabilities. First, those studies that explored *firm attributes* had found a relationship between the size of African SMEs and their internationalization. For example, they suggest that small firms are more likely to face resource constraints than medium-sized ones, which may hamper their international performance (Naudé & Serumaga-Zake, 2003). Other scholars posited that African SMEs, despite their small size, should commit to international markets in order to avoid fierce domestic market competition and increase their revenue streams in foreign markets (El Makrini, 2017; Gomes et al., 2018). Second, *strategic advantage* was considered in terms of decision-making speed and digitalization. When African SMEs rapidly make strategic decisions, they can effectively deploy their limited resources in dynamic environments to support their international performance (Adomako, Frimpong, Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). Also, the digitalization of African SMEs, in terms of internet and social media use, can reduce interaction costs and increase the reach of firms to distant markets (Hammerschlag et al., 2020; Hinson & Adjasi, 2009). Information and communications technologies help African SMEs to adopt smart product processes and quickly expand into international markets (Chowdhury, 2006). Third, *strategic orientation* was found to be a widely studied antecedent of African SME

internationalization (Boso et al., 2012). Our sample studies show that entrepreneurial orientation is an overarching construct (Kropp et al., 2008) of individual dimensions (innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking) (Boso et al., 2017; Kropp et al., 2006) that are conducive to the internationalization of African SMEs. Also, export orientation is vital for African SMEs to prepare for international entry (Birru et al., 2019; Okpara, 2009). Finally, the resources and capabilities of African SMEs are considered vital, as they can enable them to overcome any constraints and internationalize. For example, export marketing capabilities enable African SMEs to respond to any customers needs and competitor moves in international markets (Boso, Adeola et al., 2019; Haddoud, Beynon et al., 2018; Haddoud et al., 2019). Similarly, product, process, and technology innovation acts as an idiosyncratic resource that enables African SMEs to secure unique export market positions (Boso et al., 2013; Donbesuur, Ampong et al., 2020; Edeh et al., 2020).

Relational-level antecedents emphasize network formation, penetration, and types in support of the internationalization of African SMEs. Considering the importance of *network formation*, research shows that African SMEs face internal resource constraints and experience domestic market challenges that require them to form networks (El Makrini, 2017; Goncalves & Smith, 2019; Gumede & Rasmussen, 2002). However, it is not enough for SMEs to only form relationships; *network penetration* is required to jointly seek innovative activities suited to support international performance (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2020). By forming strong network ties, African SMEs can frequently interact with partners and obtain important information (Narooz & Child, 2017). Similarly, trust among partners facilitates the penetration and timely availability of the technological and market knowledge vital for internationalization (Amoako & Matlay, 2015; Mahamadou, 2021). Further, *network types* matter for African SMEs, whereby personal networks involving friends and family members in domestic and foreign markets can enable efficient resource exchange and speedy entry into international markets (Berko Obeng Damoah, 2018; Rutashobya & Jaensson, 2004). Other studies suggest that business ties with customers, suppliers, and institutions are vital to remain competitive and achieve international performance (Hammerschlag et al., 2020; Kujala & Törnroos, 2018).

Environmental-level antecedents relate to the domestic and international market conditions that play important roles in the internationalization of African SMEs. Scholars indicate that any similarity between domestic and foreign markets reduces the risk of failure for African SMEs and therefore promotes their internationalization intent (Calof & Viviers, 1995; Jekanyika Matanda, 2012). Moreover, government policies offer finance and regulatory support to African SMEs, thereby leading to international performance (Appiah et al., 2019), and indigenous institutions act as an alternative to the weak formal institutions found in African markets and enforce the credible commitment of African SMEs to international activities (Omeihe et al., 2021).

Our review further revealed a number of moderators for the antecedents-outcome relationship. We grouped them into three categories: firm-, relational-, and environmental-level (see Fig. 6). At the *firm level*, *resource flexibility* strengthens the impact of strategic decision speed on international performance (Adomako, Frimpong, Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). Also, *structural organicity* bolsters the impact of speedy strategic decisions and innovation on international performance because African SMEs with organic structures are more autonomous and focus more on creativity in decision-making (Adomako, Frimpong, Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021; Boso et al., 2013).

At the *relational-level*, studies have shown that international marketing channel management capability acts as a moderator because stronger ties with partners provide access to network resources that facilitate the beneficial effect of innovation, risk-taking, proactiveness, and aggressive behavior for regional expansion (Boso et al., 2017) as well as international performance (Boso et al., 2013; Edeh et al., 2020).

At the environmental level, *competitive intensity* appeared to be a vital moderating factor. Scholars posit that, to increase their domestic market

competitive intensity, African SMEs need to be proactive and act swiftly respond to their competitors' moves, which can strengthen the impact of strategic decision speed on international performance (Adomako, Frimpong, Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). Moreover, domestic market competitive intensity encourages African SMEs to exploit their managers' promotion focus for international performance (Adomako et al., 2017). In regard to export market competitive intensity, it has been argued that increasing competition in foreign markets requires African SMEs to be more creative, which can strengthen the impact of innovation on international performance (Boso et al., 2013). However, others have argued that strong export market competition can reduce the impact of innovation and of market responsiveness for international performance because dysfunctional competition undercuts the value of new products (Boso, Adeola et al., 2019). For *export market dynamism*, it has been argued that the flux export environment requires market-oriented behaviors to learn and adapt to environmental changes, thereby promoting international performance (Boso et al., 2012). A number of studies considered the role played by the institutional environment as a moderator. For example, Haddoud, Onjewu et al. (2018) found that *export promotion programs* reduce any internal informational and external environmental barriers and promote the export propensity of African SMEs. Donbesuur, Ampong et al. (2020) suggested that domestic *institutional specificity and enforceability* enhance the impact of innovation on international performance because SMEs feel that their technological investments are protected in African markets. Similarly, a stronger *rule of law* in host countries strengthens the impact of managers' optimism on equity entry mode because the managers expect their investments not to be at risk in foreign markets (Adomako, Frimpong, Mohammed et al., 2021).

4.3. Stream 2: antecedents–mediators–outcomes (indirect effect and moderators)

Our review findings revealed that some studies (18) had considered the mediating factors between the antecedents-outcomes relationship (as shown in Fig. 6 – central block). These factors enable African SMEs to exploit their antecedents to achieve better international and strategic outcomes. To this end, our analysis suggested two categories: international entrepreneurial behaviors and country-specific advantages.

International entrepreneurial behaviors relate to the actions required to expand into international markets (Pidduck et al., 2021) and consist of international learning efforts, opportunity discovery, marketing planning, flexibility and transformation, and international R&D teams. *International learning efforts* relate to the information and knowledge of foreign markets that can enable African SMEs to overcome any domestic institutional voids (Adomako et al., 2019) and capitalize on their own export market orientation for international performance (Olabode et al., 2018). Moreover, experiential and double-loop learning efforts enable African SMEs to exploit their opportunity confidence and alertness for international venturing (Masango & Lassalle, 2020). *Opportunity discovery* is the entrepreneurial effort to scan the international environment and identify any opportunities ahead of competitors. In this regard, Donbesuur, Boso et al. (2020) suggested that African new ventures can use entrepreneurial orientation to promote opportunity discovery—which, in turn, leads to international performance. *Marketing planning* also mediates the impact of export orientation and export promotion programs on international performance; it does because international-oriented firms plan marketing programs that can satisfy customer needs and meet international market objectives (Assadinia et al., 2019; Njinyah, 2018). For the mediating effect of *flexibility and resource transformation*, we found that our sample studies had suggested that strategic orientations and network penetration enable African SMEs to be flexible and to transform their resources to meet the needs of foreign markets, thereby enhancing their own international performance (Boso et al., 2018; Matanda et al., 2016). Further, *international R&D teams* mediate the relationship between R&D intensity and international

product performance thanks to their awareness of the technological trends occurring in foreign markets (Adomako, Amankwah-Amoah, Danso et al., 2021).

Country-specific advantages relate to access to credit and skilled employees and to the protection of information assets. Considering the mediating role played by access to *credit and skilled employees*, Tajeddin and Carney (2018) argued that, by establishing networks, African SMEs gain access to finance and human capital that can increase their own exporting intensity. Also, government policies aimed at promoting export lead to laws suited to facilitate businesses and offer access to financial intermediaries that are conducive for international performance (Njinyah, 2018). Moreover, the *protection of information assets* mediates the relationship between the business intelligence of African SMEs and their international performance (Tarek et al., 2016).

For the moderators, our review identified a number of factors for both the antecedents-mediators relationship and the mediators-outcomes one. We grouped the moderators into three categories: firm-, relational-, and environmental-level. At the firm level, *firm age* moderates the impact of perceived corruption on digitalization, so that younger firms experience more strongly the positive impact of perceived corruption on business process digitalization (Adomako, Amankwah-Amoah, Tarba et al., 2021). Also, *prior industry experience* strengthens the impact of opportunity alertness and confidence on experiential learning due to industry environment awareness (Masango & Lassalle, 2020). And *knowledge creation processes* act as moderators because they can strengthen the impact of international R&D teams on international product performance due to their ability to generate and share knowledge (Adomako, Amankwah-Amoah, Danso et al., 2021).

At the *relational level*, *business connections* can strengthen the impact of opportunity discovery on the international performance of African new ventures because relational ties are suited to provide efficient and effective access to information (Donbesuur, Boso et al., 2020). Also, *political connections* act as moderators because they enable African SMEs to use any domestic environmental uncertainty as a mean to promote their degree of internationalization (Adomako, Frimpong et al., 2020).

At the *environmental level*, *market uncertainty* acts as a moderating factor. For example, Adomako et al. (2019) posited that domestic market uncertainty strengthens the positive impact of domestic institutional voids on international learning efforts. However, given the increased competition and rapid changes in foreign markets, export market uncertainty decreases the positive impact of international learning on international performance (Olabode et al., 2018). Given any favorable policies and help from local governments, *domestic institutional support* strengthens the positive impact of opportunity discovery on African venture performance (Donbesuur, Boso et al., 2020). Also, the *psychic distance* between the domestic and host countries act as a moderator because a higher psychic distance requires African SMEs to exploit their marketing programs for international performance (Assadinia et al., 2019).

5. Discussion and future research directions

Our study was aimed at providing an overview of the current state of the research on the international entrepreneurial behavior of African SMEs. During the past 10 years, such research has seen steady growth, providing important insights but also raising important questions about the antecedents, key mediators, moderators, outcomes, internationalization processes, and opportunity recognition of internationalizing SMEs from Africa. In this regard, we conducted a SLR of 66 articles published in 33 leading journals across 12 disciplines over 26 years. We organized the findings in an integrative framework encompassing the antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes of African SME internationalization. This helped us to identify, in the existing research, important knowledge gaps that offer opportunities for future research. This section presents a discussion of such opportunities.

5.1. Theoretical and content suggestions

Our SLR revealed abundant opportunities for future international entrepreneurship research in the context of Africa. In this section the related knowledge gaps are highlighted and promising theoretical and content directions for future research are suggested.

5.1.1. Future research on the entrepreneurial attributes of founders and managers

Compared to general entrepreneurship and international business research, African SME-centric studies tend to place less emphasis on those founder/manager entrepreneurial attributes that shape decision-making (Masango & Lassalle, 2020). Research drawing insights from the RBV suggests that the entrepreneurial orientation of managers points at their risk-taking, proactive, and innovation behaviors, which make them more courageous and more likely to access distant markets (Haddoud, Beynon et al., 2018; Olabode et al., 2018). However, the manifestation of such relevant entrepreneurial characteristics and of how they influence the internationalization of African SMEs remains unclear. This is partially due to weak theoretical foundations and to a lack of a comprehensive picture of the entrepreneurial behaviors of African SME founders/managers. This gap thus opens up opportunities to advance the knowledge on a number of intriguing issues. For example, Holt (2012) used image theory to explain the receptivity of firms toward particular strategic choices in their internationalization process. Behavioral theory research suggests that the motivations of managers/founders aid their strategic leadership and promote internationalization (Chittoor et al., 2019). Therefore, research on the internationalization of African SMEs could benefit from behavioral theory. To delve deeper into the mechanisms of internationalization decision-making process, scholars could investigate the role played by the mental models of founders/managers and entrepreneurial alertness (e.g., the cognitive structures and processes they use to make sense of the world and to sketch particular situations in their minds). Also, it would be interesting to examine the factors that shape African SME mental models and their decisions to internationalize. In this vein, future studies could consider the rational or irrational behaviors of decision-makers—such as entrepreneurial aspiration, entrepreneurial intention, entrepreneurial alertness, manager reputation, improvisational behavior, and dispositional optimism and heuristics—that shape their mental model and drive the internationalization of African SMEs. Such studies could draw insights from effectuation logic and examine the recognition of international opportunities by resource-constrained SMEs based in Africa.

5.1.2. More research on business and political networks

The empirical studies in our review sample provided some evidence on the importance of networks, and of personal and business ones in particular. However, this stream of research is still in its infancy, and requires scholars to devote greater attention to this phenomenon. African SMEs face context-specific challenges (e.g., institutional voids, corruption, and market turbulence) and firm-specific limitations (e.g., resource constraints, limited knowledge, and a lack of international experience), which may influence their sustainable performance in international markets (Adomako et al., 2019; Boso et al., 2016; Haddoud, Onjewu et al., 2018; Mendy et al., 2021). Drawing insights from network theory, prior studies suggest that network ties enable African SMEs to gain foreign market knowledge and seek innovation activities that are conducive to internationalization (Rutashobya & Jaensson, 2004). However, despite the fact that home- and host-country partners can have access to different information and possess unique resources that might differently affect SME internationalization (Puthusserry et al., 2020), scholars have rarely distinguished between domestic and foreign networks (Boso et al., 2017). Thus, future studies could understand the implications of domestic vs. international networks for the internationalization of African SMEs. Relatedly, future studies could adopt

strategic decision-making theory to understand the approaches to domestic vs. international network formation (Alvarez & Barney, 2005; Wiltbank et al., 2006)—for example, in relation to the extent to which effectuation and causation approaches drive domestic vs. international network formation for internationalization. It is worth arguing that mere network formation is not sufficient; African SMEs need to make efforts aimed at nurturing and cultivating their network ties while avoiding the opportunistic behaviors of partners (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2020). In this vein, the relational view can be useful to understand the creation and capture of value in domestic vs. international networks (Dyer et al., 2018). By leveraging network theory, studies could differentiate between exploratory vs. exploitative networks and examine their impact on SME internationalization and post-entry performance. For example, domestic partners might have more complementary resources and capabilities than international ones and effectively drive the internationalization of SMEs (Zahoor & Al-Tabbaa, 2021). Therefore, future studies could answer the following questions: “To what extent does relational specific investment promote the knowledge exchange and internationalization of African SMEs?”, “How does social capital evolve and promote the internationalization of African SMEs?”, and “What role do contractual vs. relational governance play in driving the internationalization of African SMEs in domestic vs. international networks?”

While business networks are vital sources of knowledge (Donbesuur, Boso et al., 2020), recent research has suggested that political networks—i.e., a non-market strategy—are crucial in the international venturing of African SMEs, given the weak regulatory institutions in their own home markets (Adomako, Frimpong et al., 2020). Thus, future research in this direction could examine both market-based (e.g., business networks and differentiation) and non-market-based strategies (e.g., political connections), and determine their divergent impacts on the internationalization of SMEs from Africa. Scholars could also use upper echelons theory to understand the role played by founders/managers in driving non-market strategies for internationalization. Specifically, there is potential in paying greater attention to the characteristics of founders/managers—such as their age, gender, education, nationality, religious beliefs, and international experience—and to how these characteristics shape non-market strategy and, in turn, influence the internationalization processes of African SMEs. Relatedly, using institutional theory, future studies could also examine the enactment of internationalization activities through non-market strategies suited to counteract the fragility and deficiency of African market institutions. In addition, scholars could conduct cross-national studies aimed at examining the efficacy of the institutions found in the African continent and at understanding their role in the internationalization processes of African SMEs.

5.1.3. Future attention to the role played by informal institutions

An emerging stream of international entrepreneurship research is considering the importance of informal institutions, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other related types of organizations, in supporting the business operations of SMEs (Stekelorum et al., 2020). The primary focus of NGOs is on social value creation and on the mitigation of any undesirable side effects of businesses (Rodríguez et al., 2016). NGOs provide bottom-of-pyramid (BoP) community members with support and knowledge or insights in a certain domain (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Rahman et al., 2019). They also create an atmosphere conducive to fostering the cross-border investment of entrepreneurial businesses and to improving international business success (Oparaocha, 2015). Future research would benefit by further exploring the role played by NGOs in international entrepreneurship within the African context: “In what ways are NGOs more suitable to support international entrepreneurship in Africa?”, “Does such support depend on poverty alleviation programs, using micro-enterprise as a development tool that entails subcontracting work to home-based producers, supplying materials, and providing designs?”, and “Can NGOs increase the international participation of African SMEs operating in unique industries like the artisan and home-

based handicraft sectors?”

Also, prior research suggests that MNEs collaborate with NGOs to the end of empowering BoP community members and supporting their entrepreneurial potential (Brugmann & Prahalad, 2007; de Lange et al., 2015). For example, Microsoft has connected with the Pratham NGO to deliver personal computers (PC) to Indian villages, whereas Intel and other Indian information technology firms—including Wipro and HCL infosystems—have partnered with other NGOs to launch community PCs. Nestlé has partnered with NGOs to deliver educational programs on nutrition and nutritionally fortified food products to the poor in Colombia, Peru, and the Philippines. Against this background, future studies could investigate (i) how NGO-MNE partnerships disrupt the existing problematic formal institutions in Africa and support the scaling up of rural and urban SME business models, (ii) the role played by NGOs-MNEs partnerships in addressing the needs of BoP community members in Africa, (iii) the extent to which NGOs invite MNEs to take responsibility in innovative rural projects aimed at developing the expertise of African BoP entrepreneurs and provide them with international market knowledge, and (iv) the role played by NGO-MNE partnerships in facilitating the internationalization of African SMEs.

5.1.4. Research opportunities for international social entrepreneurship

Fourth, international entrepreneurship research has made important contributions to our understanding of how African ventures affect the world in terms of financial wealth creation (Abubakar et al., 2019; Hammerschlag et al., 2020). However, we believe that social entrepreneurship with blended social and profitability values should be the focus of the international entrepreneurship field in the context of Africa. Social entrepreneurship, which calls for consideration of ethical values and practices in international entrepreneurship (Zahra et al., 2014), emphasizes the recognition, evaluation, and exploitation of international opportunities with a focus on international-level social issues while entailing both economic and social cost/benefit analysis (Desa, 2012; Terjesen et al., 2013). The intersection of international and social business activities promotes international social entrepreneurship, thus bringing important social and economic implications. Specifically, our experience with COVID-19 has made it obvious that economic issues can no longer be separated from social ones (Zahra, 2021). As such, future studies could seek to answer the following questions: “Who are the African social entrepreneurs, what drives them, and how do they perform across countries?”, “How do international social enterprises differ from international new ventures originating from Africa?”, “Are their differences more pronounced in certain African countries or industries?”, “What is the linkage between international social entrepreneurship and the creation of international social-economic value by African SMEs?”, “How do international social entrepreneurs originating from Africa tackle human dislocation, healthcare, homelessness, and malnutrition?”, and “How do institutions operating in African markets influence international social entrepreneurship?”

5.1.5. The need for research on international digital entrepreneurship

In recent times, the use of digital technologies has gained recognition both in the workplace and in everyday life (Depaoli et al., 2020; Papadopoulos et al., 2020). Digital technologies have offered innovative solutions and enabled SMEs to continue operating during the COVID-19 pandemic (Puthusserry et al., 2022). They have enabled SMEs to engage in international activities by providing international market intelligence and the timely availability of information on international market opportunities (Cassetta et al., 2020; Pergelova et al., 2019). The growing use of digital technologies The application of digital technologies also enables SMEs to become more responsive and agile while adapting to changing market conditions (Zahoor et al., 2022). Recent years have witnessed a strong trend toward digital entrepreneurship (i.e., the creation of businesses that draw upon digital technologies to exploit markets) (Abubakre et al., 2021; Ngoasong, 2018). For example, Kenyan organic fresh vegetable producers were able to survive the COVID-19

pandemic by reaching consumers abroad through online platforms. Given the changes introduced by COVID-19, African SMEs are likely to reconsider their business model and emphasize international digital entrepreneurship. Therefore, future studies could address questions such as: “Do young African entrepreneurs possess the digital capabilities needed to enhance their business offerings and enter new markets?”, “How do difference markers—such as age, disability, religion, social class, and international experience—intersect with the redeeming potential of digital entrepreneurship for internationalization within and beyond Africa?”, “What role do market and non-market values play in shaping digital entrepreneurship activities for the internationalization of African SMEs?”, “How do institutions affect the digital entrepreneurship of SMEs from African markets in relation to driving their internationalization?” and “How does digital entrepreneurship affect different modes of internationalization?”

5.1.6. Considering mediating and moderating mechanisms

Our integrative framework highlights several moderators and mediators that channel the relationship between antecedents and outcomes. However, more research is needed to progress international entrepreneurship research. Often being aware of their domestic market environments, African SMEs construct their legitimacy through active institutional work (Donnelly & Manolova, 2020). Therefore, we call research to be conducted from the agency and decision-making perspectives to shape the firm-specific construction of institutions in their decisions. African SMEs may develop competencies suited to change institutions in their favor and to promote their internationalization. It would be interesting to identify such entrepreneurial and firm characteristics and competencies in order to consider the mediating role played by formal and informal institutions in the internationalization of African SMEs. For example, it has been argued that manager gender affects a firm's propensity towards bribery (Tuliao & Chen, 2017), which can lead to domestic institutional voids and increased international activities (Stephan et al., 2015). Therefore, future studies could focus on the role played by managerial characteristics in relation to bribery and corruption in Africa and their subsequent implications for African SME internationalization as an escape motive. Firms are also divesting and then re-internationalizing into foreign markets; there therefore is scope for future studies aimed at examining the divestment patterns and re-internationalizing approaches of African SMEs. In this context, scholars could compare different types of firms, including family- vs. non-family owned ones. In addition, scholars could pay greater attention to the inward-outward internationalization of African SMEs (cf. Idris et al., 2021).

5.1.7. The need to go beyond the existing outcomes

Finally, there is potential for future research to study the outcomes of African SME internationalization. Traditionally, prior research has emphasized international propensity and international performance as outcomes. Despite these important variables, research needs to go beyond and expand the outcome spectrum. In this regard, future studies could distinguish between pre- and post-entry internationalization and understand how African SMEs attain pre-entry positional advantages and achieve post-entry speed and commitment, scale up their business models, and sustain their own performance across international markets. Moreover, limited research has been conducted on strategic outcomes that provide opportunities for future studies. Scholars could thus use international expansion and performance as explanatory variables for the strategic outcomes of HRM, international sustainability and corporate social responsibility, absorptive capacity, international responsible innovation, ethical global value chains, business model innovation, and exploratory and exploitative innovations.

5.2. Methodological, geographical and industry-related suggestions

Following the aforementioned theoretical and empirical suggestions will require researchers to reconsider methodologies, industry sectors,

and business environments in order to better understand the patterns of African international entrepreneurship.

5.2.1. Suggestions related to methodologies

Our first point pertains to research methodologies. Our findings reveal that most researchers had adopted a static quantitative research approach to examine the internationalization of African SMEs, taking a firm-level perspective to understand such SMEs' entrepreneurial behaviors and international venturing. This approach has hitherto not helped the current scholarship to ‘reveal’ the nature of the country-level effects on SME internationalization. Although institutional-related factors were considered, no discussion of the specific conditions found in particular countries was conducted. There is thus a need for methodological efforts aimed at mixing levels of analysis by adopting appropriate statistical techniques. Multi-level research would make the international entrepreneurship research field more applicable to related disciplines and develop important insights into the individual-, firm-, network-, and country-level impacts on the internationalization of African SMEs. Relatedly, we would urge scholars to move beyond conventional methods—such as cross-sectional surveys—and adopt more sophisticated research ones. By so doing, they could address some interesting questions on the international entrepreneurial behavior of African SMEs. African culture consists of a mixture of countries with unique characteristics in terms of laws, beliefs, knowledge, customs, and morals (Chigbu et al., 2017; Schurman, 2018). These cultural difference between countries in the African region and beyond can have implications for internationalization. Future studies could therefore use qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the international entrepreneurial behaviors of SMEs across different African regions. By adopting ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology, scholars could offer a detailed and comprehensive account of African international entrepreneurs. Future studies could also conduct experimental and event studies, in which the entrepreneurs and the local contexts would become central to the analysis. Such studies could examine the issues related to the escape internationalization motives of internationalizing SME entrepreneurs stemming from weak formal institutions, and how external shocks and political instability affect the internationalization decisions of African SMEs.

5.2.2. A reconsideration of the geographical context

Another takeaway from our review findings is that the geographical focus of empirical research has hitherto been mainly limited to Ghana, South Africa, and Nigeria. This could indicate a cyclical scholarship bound to these countries as a result of the availability of and ease of access to data. However, to advance research on the African region, future studies could consider other underrepresented countries—e.g., Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Seychelles, Botswana, Libya, Rwanda, Malawi, Mali, and Niger, among others. Indeed, research suggests that SMEs from diverse African countries are eager to compete in international markets, while the scope and speed of their participation might differ (Al-Kwafi et al., 2020). We therefore advocate the undertaking of comparative cross-national longitudinal studies that consider the characteristics of different African countries that have hitherto often been under researched.

5.2.3. Attention to underrepresented industry sectors

In terms of industry sectors, our studies show that their samples were limited to the manufacturing and services ones, with little justification given for the choices. Certain industry sectors—e.g., the platform, retail, professional services, and cultural ones—have hitherto not been the object of scholarly attention. In order to augment the global attractiveness of their product and service offerings, the SMEs in these sectors are often symbolic, creative, and knowledge-intensive (Etemad & Motaghi, 2018; Garud et al., 2020). Thus, future studies are needed to understand the internationalization patterns of African SMEs operating in the retail, cultural, platform, and professional services industries.

Scholars could whereby determine the implications of international entrepreneurship theories for African SME location- and non-location bound advantages in different industries. Thus, future studies could pay greater attention to industry sector and compare the internationalization processes of SMEs across different ones.

5.2.4. The need for a definition of SME in Africa

A final takeaway is that, although our sample studies did classify firms as SMEs based on the size of their workforces, they did so based on different thresholds, variously using cut-off points of 250, 300, or 500 employees. This multiplicity represents a lack of consensus. We would therefore call for future research to develop a common definition of SME to be used in the African context. This would enable researchers to generalize their findings to SMEs operating in any part of the continent. Furthermore, studies could compare different types of firms—such as micro and SMEs—and the support structures available in different African countries that either facilitate or hinder the internationalization of different types of firms.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to systematically review the international entrepreneurial behaviors of African SMEs. In so doing, it focused on understanding the evolution of the international entrepreneurial behavior of SMEs originating from the African region. By reviewing a sample of 66 articles published during the last 27 years, we traced the evolution of research on the international entrepreneurial behaviors of African SMEs. We showed how the topic of international entrepreneurial behavior has gained prominence over the last five years, with greater reliance on quantitative methods to understand African SME internationalization and a particular focus on Ghana, South Africa, and Nigeria.

Based on our content analysis, we developed an integrative framework and discussed the antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes of international entrepreneurial behavior research. Our analysis suggests that the firm- and environmental-level antecedents widely investigated in the literature may be unique to African entrepreneurial and institutional characteristics. This also suggests that individual- and relational-level antecedents need more scholarly attention. Further, research on moderators and mediators has recently received attention, which suggests a wide scope for future scholarly work.

By identifying factors that are complementary in designing strategies and taking action to achieve internationalization, this study sets new directions for international entrepreneurial researchers and practitioners from Africa. It opens several avenues for future research on international entrepreneurial behavior in Africa and beyond. First, entrepreneurial characteristics and their influence on African SME internationalization have remained little researched. Future research could thus seek to explore the founder/manager characteristics and mental models that guide the internationalization decisions of SMEs. Second, earlier research often ascribed the internationalization of African SMEs to networks. As a continuation of this research, future studies could explore the implications of domestic vs. international business networks and of political ones for the internationalization of African SMEs. Third, future research could consider the factors suited to change the institutions prevalent in African markets in favor of SMEs and to promote the latter's internationalization. Additionally, empirical research conducted using novel methodologies and focused on under-explored geographical locations could unlock those external environment critical events that induce international entrepreneurial behaviors.

In conclusion, our study contributes to international entrepreneurship literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of the extant research on international entrepreneurial behaviors within the context of Africa, with a specific framework suited to integrate and synthesize the findings of studies on the international entrepreneurial behaviors of African SMEs at multiple levels of analysis. Additionally, our review of the literature enabled us to highlight some knowledge gaps

and provide future research directions. These could serve as a starting point to fill the knowledge gaps in the existing literature and, as a result, provide a more thorough understanding of the international entrepreneurial behaviors of African SMEs, with the aim of strengthening the efforts made by African policymakers and practitioners to harness the internationalization efforts of entrepreneurs.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nadia Zahoor: Writing – original draft, Software, Resources, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Zaheer Khan:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Martin Meyer:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Benjamin Laker:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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