

RESEARCH PAPER

Entrepreneurial Mindset and SME Internationalisation: Empirical Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: This study investigates the relationship between Entrepreneurial Mindset and SME Internationalisation in Uganda. We conceptualise entrepreneurial mindset along three dimensions of deliberative mindset, implemental mindset, and compulsive mindset, and each dimension is tested to see how it correlates with SME internationalisation.

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DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: The study adopted a correlation and cross-sectional research design on a sample of 144 exporting SMEs. Hypotheses were tested using a Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis technique.

FINDINGS: The findings reveal that among the three dimensions of entrepreneurial mindset, it is only the implemental mindset that is positively and significantly related to SME internationalisation.

IMPLICATIONS: The findings imply that successful SME internationalisation in a developing country like Uganda can be achieved by managers and owners who have ideas that are more inclined to implement the pre-conceived international business ideas.

LIMITATIONS: The findings are from exporting SMEs in Uganda, the extent to which they can be generalised to firms from other Sub-Saharan countries is not known.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE: Research examining the role of entrepreneurial mindset on SME internationalisation is limited and this paper contributes empirically to this area from a developing country context.

KEYWORDS: *Internationalisation; Entrepreneurial Mindset; SMEs; Uganda*

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

Unlike in the past where internationalisation was considered to be a preserve for large multinational companies, the role of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the international economy has been increasing in recent times (Misati *et al.*, 2017; Ahimbisibwe *et al.*, 2020). Traditionally, SMEs focused on their domestic markets due to costs associated with taking up additional foreign markets (Okpara and Kabongo, 2010). Apparently, with globalisation, the emergence of the internet, and other modern communication technologies, the cost for international participation has been brought down for smaller and under-resourced companies (Cavusgil and Knight, 2015). Firm specific factors, such as network capabilities, prior international experience of the managers, firm resources, or market knowledge, have also been highlighted as key in explaining the current wave of increased internationalisation among SMEs (Rutashobya and Jaensson, 2004; Karami and Tang, 2019; Ngoma, 2016; Abubakari *et al.*, 2022). These factors influence the decisions to internationalise, the choice of foreign market entry mode, and market choice, as well as the speed of internationalisation.

Despite the plethora of research in this area, studies examining the role played by the cognitive processes of the SME owners and managers are sparse, and yet anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that strategic decisions begin in the mind and culminate into actions (Haynie *et al.*, 2010; Dweck, 2006; Gollwitzer, 1990). Accordingly, the mindset orients how owners and managers view the world. This acts as a lens through which they evaluate the environment, interpret the information about uncertain situations and make decisions (Nadkarni *et al.*, 2006; Acedo and Jones, 2007). Therefore, based on the view that SME internationalisation is an entrepreneurial activity (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996; Andersson, 2011), this study acknowledges that the entrepreneurial mindset (which is defined as a specific state of mind that orientates human conduct towards entrepreneurial activities and outcomes) could be the differentiating factor between those SMEs that dare to internationalise and those that remain reluctant and passive towards international expansion (Haynie *et al.*, 2010). In particular, the mindset is presented as a resource that liberates entrepreneurs

from wrong presumptions and helps them to identify and exploit emerging profit opportunities in disregard of the resources currently under their control (McMullen and Kier, 2016).

Consequently, this paper is motivated by several reasons. First, the available evidence indicates that many studies on entrepreneurial mindset have tended to assess its impact on business performance among domestic-based firms (Ngek, 2012; Njeru, 2014) largely ignoring its possible predictive validity on SMEs' internationalisation. Second, the existing literature on SME internationalisation seems to be limited in as far as explaining how the entrepreneurs' mindset facilitates the process of internationalisation (Felicio *et al.*, 2012). Felicio *et al.* (2012) observe that very little attention has been given to SMEs where the multidisciplinary role of entrepreneurs and their mindset is a key determinant in their internationalisation behaviour. Finally, while most studies have tended to view entrepreneurial mindset from the personality traits' perspective (George and Zhou, 2001; Njeru, 2014; Ngek, 2012), in this paper, we take a cognitive view and provide evidence on how each state of an entrepreneurial mindset (deliberative, implemental and compulsive mindsets) influence SME internationalisation. This is achieved in a questionnaire survey of 144 exporting SMEs in Uganda.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: the next section is a theoretical background. This is followed by a literature review and hypothesis development, methodology, results, discussion, conclusions and implications, and lastly limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical Review

This study is underpinned within the Mindset Theory of Action Phases (MTAP) that was developed and refined by Gollwitzer (1990). The theory postulates that the pursuit of goals is made up of different phases and each phase is characterised by distinct cognitive processes that contribute to goal completion. Accordingly, the first phase is the pre-decisional phase where individuals deliberate on all competing opportunities to ultimately select the most viable one (deliberative mindset). This evaluation stage involves entrepreneurial cognition processes that assess the perception of risks and uncertainties, and determines whether or not to act upon the idea. The second phase is the post-decisional phase where individuals must initiate actions to implement the selected ideas (implemental mindset). Accordingly, implemental-minded individuals strive towards goal achievement and process information related to where, how and when the goal is implemented (Naumann, 2017). Based on this theoretical lens, it is possible to assume that SMEs with entrepreneurial-inclined managers and owners should be well-positioned to assess competing international business opportunities and design suitable actions to exploit them.

Entrepreneurial Mindset and SME Internationalisation

Entrepreneurial mindset can be defined as a specific state of mind that orients human conduct towards entrepreneurial activities and outcomes (Commarmond, 2017). While the literature linking entrepreneurial mindset and SME internationalisation is still scant, there is growing recognition

that the speed at which SMEs are becoming involved in the international arena could be related to the cognitive nature of the individual entrepreneurs who run these firms (Acedo and Jones, 2007; Oviatt and McDougall, 1995; Nadkarni *et al.*, 2006). Specifically, Nadkarni *et al.* (2006) posit that the mindset is an important human resource in international success because firms are likely to use their mindsets to scan international opportunities, diagnose constraints imposed by foreign markets, and guide alternative internationalisation choices. In support, Oviatt and McDougall (1995) posit that the mindset of the founders and other influential individuals could be an important driver of internationalisation among resource constrained SMEs. Conceptually, Mathisen and Arnulf (2014) present entrepreneurial mindset as a multidimensional concept composed of deliberative mindsets and implemental mindsets as well as compulsive mindsets. These mindsets tend to have differing effects on an entrepreneurial activity of a firm (Mathisen and Arnulf, 2014). Since internationalisation of SMEs is regarded as an entrepreneurial activity (Andersson, 2011), it is prudent to believe that the various forms of entrepreneurial mindset would have varying influences on the internationalisation efforts of SMEs.

In this regard, this study postulates that the deliberative mindsets that tend to position individuals to reflect on the feasibility of competing opportunities for the purpose of selecting the most viable ones (Taylor and Gollwitzer, 1995; McMullen and Kier, 2016) could perhaps have an influence on the internationalisation of SMEs. Accordingly, deliberative mindsets tend to develop in the earlier phases of opportunity identification that induces entrepreneurs to generate a great deal of information that later forms the basis for performance outcomes (McMullen and Kier, 2016). Since information generation has long been considered to be critical among internationalising SMEs (Suarez-Ortega and Alamo-Vera, 2005; Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2016), it is expected that a deliberative mindset could be an important motivation towards international involvement. This submission is consistent with the submissions of Yeoh (2005) who argues that information acquisition enables decision-makers to evaluate market opportunities and threats for better positioning in international markets. In particular, the possession of information allows owners and managers to evaluate appropriate markets, the possible product changes, the available distribution channels, the competition, as well as the peculiar market conditions; this helps them to proceed with or decline a given entrepreneurial opportunity in a foreign market (Sakarya *et al.*, 2007; Mogos Descotes and Walliser, 2013). Based on this submission, it is possible to suggest that a deliberative mindset drives entrepreneurs to pursue the best international business opportunities since such individuals evaluate all potential opportunities from a set of competing ideas. We therefore hypothesise that:

H1. There is a significant relationship between deliberative mindsets and SME internationalisation.

Considering the implemental mindsets, it is acknowledged that individuals with such mindsets will be more inclined towards formulating actions intended to seize the perceived opportunities (Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006). Therefore, having deliberations on whether to internationalise or not may be one step towards international involvement; however, this would be without transiting from

this pre-decisional phase to the post-decisional phase. The post-decisional phase is concerned with how implementing the successfully selected goal renders the desire to start untenable (McMullen and Kier, 2016). Therefore, entrepreneurs require an implemental mindset that is characterised by planning and executing cognitive procedures to realise the pre-selected ideas (Armor and Taylor, 2003). Based on this submission, it is possible to suggest that entrepreneurs with implemental mindsets are well-positioned to effectively acquire and utilise the information that is related to international expansion. This is consistent with Fletcher and Harris (2012) who believe that if internationalisation is to be speedy, decisions regarding international expansion require specific information that is acquired and integrated quickly. Relatedly, Gregoire *et al.* (2008) observe that organisations operate in complex and dynamic environments that are increasingly characterised by rapid and significant changes where gains in profit, growth, and competitive positioning can only be made by those individuals that can initiate actions aimed at exploiting the opportunities that arise in such changing environment. We therefore hypothesise that:

H2. There is a significant relationship between implemental mindsets and SME internationalisation.

Lastly, with compulsive mindsets, it is observed that individuals with such mindsets are highly obsessed with repeated thoughts on a perceived business idea and find it hard to control such thoughts (Mathisen and Arnulf, 2014). Accordingly, such compulsive behaviours could be a resource in an entrepreneurship situation since entrepreneurs are likely to pursue the perceived business idea with less consideration of the resources currently at hand (Mathisen and Arnulf, 2014). This observation could be true because there is growing evidence indicating that SME internationalisation is an entrepreneurial activity, and that entrepreneurs pursue international market opportunities in disregard to the resources currently under the firm's control (Andersson, 2011). Therefore, entrepreneurs who get obsessed with international business ideas may not necessarily wait to accumulate resources but can internationalise their firms using alternative structures, such as through networks (O'Cass and Weerawardena, 2009). We therefore hypothesise that:

H3. There is a significant relationship between compulsive mindsets and SME internationalisation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Data Collection, Population, and Sample Size

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted for this study. A questionnaire was used to collect data from a multi-sectorial sample of 197 exporting SMEs located in the three central districts of Uganda (Kampala, Wakiso, and Mukono). The questionnaire was developed from an extensive literature review (Gollwitzer, 1990; Mathisen and Arnulf, 2014; Knight and Cavusgil, 2004; Sullivan, 1994). The sample was determined based on Yamane's (1973) sample size selection model – $n = N/1 + N(e)^2$ from a population of 390 exporting SMEs registered with the Uganda

Export Promotions Board (UEPB). SMEs are considered firms that permanently employ between 1-49 (small-sized firms) and 50-249 (medium-sized firms) people (UEPB, 2017). In order to avoid response bias, at least three key senior informants, i.e., CEOs, export managers, or finance managers as well as operations managers in each firm, were contacted to respond to the questionnaire. Senior people are well positioned to provide the most accurate responses (O’Cass and Weerawardena, 2009). A total of 144 firms responded, implying a response rate of 73%.

Measurement of Variables

The dependent variable for this study is *SME Internationalisation* that we operationalised in terms of speed, scale, and scope (Lu and Beamish, 2001; Knight *et al.*, 2004; Sullivan, 1994; Ahimbisibwe *et al.*, 2020). The independent variable is the *entrepreneurial mindset* that we operationalised as deliberative mindset, implemental mindset, and compulsive mindset (Gollwitzer, 1990; Mathisen and Arnulf, 2014). The measurement items were adapted from the review of the literature and anchored on six-point scales to avoid response indecision associated with middle neutral points (Ntayi *et al.*, 2012) (Table 1).

Table 1: Measurement of Variables

Global Variable(s)	Construct(s)	Definition
SME internationalisation. The outward movement of a firm's international operations (Welch and Luostarinen, 1993)	Speed	<i>Length of time between the firm's inception and its first foreign activities</i>
	Scale	<i>The extent to which a firm is exposed to international markets in relation to the domestic market</i>
	Scope	<i>Territorial spread/coverage of the firm</i>
Entrepreneurial Mindset. A specific state of mind that orients human conduct towards entrepreneurial activities and outcomes (Commarmond, 2017)	Deliberative Mindsets	<i>Cognitive processes oriented towards assessing the feasibility and desirability of a specific goal</i>
	Implemental Mindsets	<i>State of mind oriented towards initiating actions to seize available business opportunities</i>
	Compulsive mindsets	<i>Perceived frequency of thoughts about a business idea</i>

Source: Literature review

Reliability and Validity

Based on the PLS-SEM technique, a measurement model for each of the study variables was run using SmartPLS software Version 3.27 to determine the factor structure, reliability, and validity of the study variables, as indicated in Figure 1. PLS-SEM was preferred because of its robustness in establishing both explanatory and confirmatory factors simultaneously (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Based on composite reliability values, all our study variables, as shown in Table 2, were found to be above the threshold of 0.7 (deliberative mindsets = 0.879, implemental mindsets = 0.865, compulsive

mindsets = 0.856, SME internationalisation = 0.876), confirming a sufficient degree of internal consistency among the study variables (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

In testing validity, both convergent validity and discriminant validity were considered. For convergent validity, the rule of thumb is that both the factor loadings and the average variance explained should be above 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). This criterion was met, as indicated in Figure 1 and Table 2, implying that the measures of the study variables were sufficiently correlated. For discriminant validity to be ascertained, the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) was preferred. Accordingly, the HTMT correlations among the study variables should be below the threshold of 0.85 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015; Kline, 2011). This was ascertained as indicated in Table 3, confirming that the constructs were distinctively different from each other.

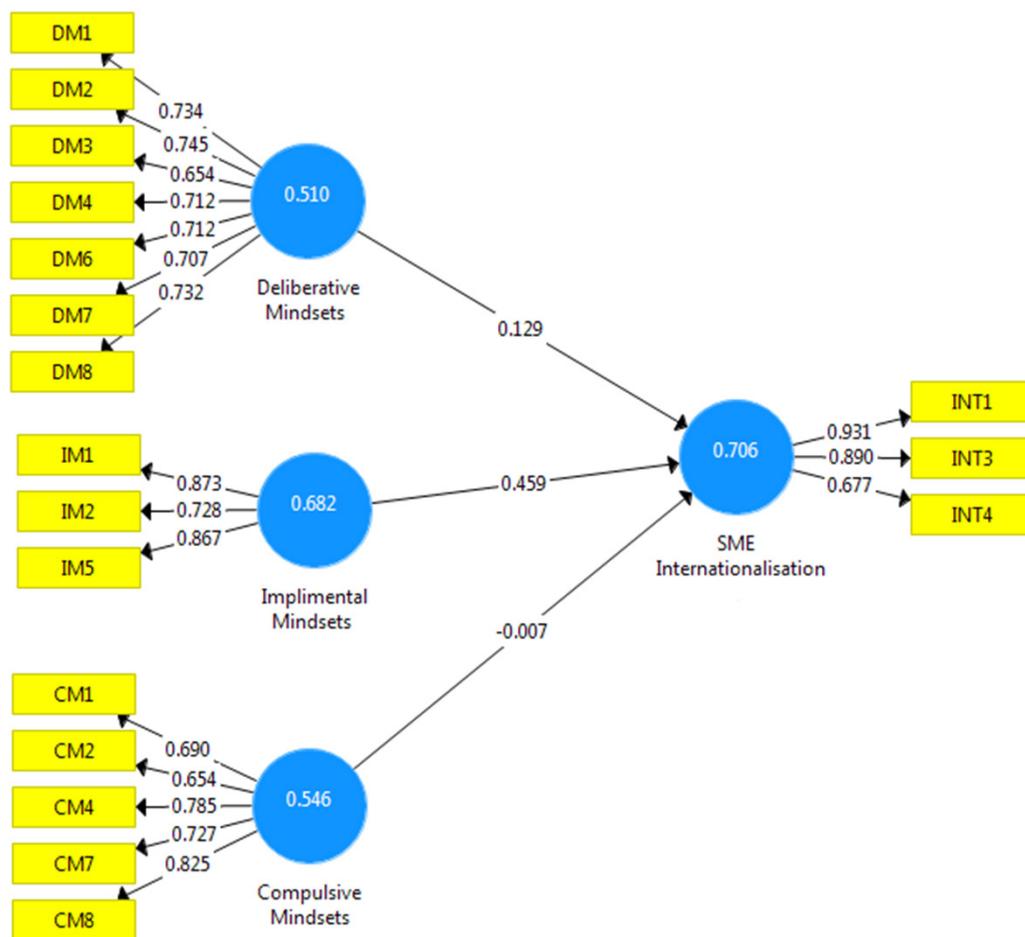


Figure 1: Measurement Models

Source: Research data

Table 2: Summary of the Measurement Model

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Deliberative Mindsets	DM1: This organisation considers both positive and negative aspects of engaging in international business operations	0.734	0.879	0.510
	DM2: We consider whether we have adequate time to dedicate to international business activities	0.745		
	DM3: We consider whether we have the financial capacity needed for international business operations	0.654		
	DM4: We consider both negative and positive information when making decisions to internationalise	0.712		
	DM6: We consider whether engaging in international business operations is the right thing for this company	0.712		
	DM7: We consider all possible business ideas when deciding to engage in international business	0.707		
	DM8: We consider whether the timing is right for us to pursue international business opportunities	0.732		
Implemental Mindsets	IM1: We often emphasise information that appears relevant to our international business expansion	0.873	0.865	0.682
	IM2: We have the necessary know-how to be engaged in international business activities	0.728		
	IM5: When we perceive an opportunity in international markets, we make sure we seize it	0.867		
Compulsive Mindsets	CM1: In this organisation we find it hard to control our thoughts about international business ideas	0.690	0.856	0.546
	CM2: Our thoughts about international business ideas interfere with other areas of our lives	0.654		
	CM4: Even when we are engaged in other activities, we keep our thoughts on international business ideas	0.785		
	CM7: Our friends have always stated that we seem to be excessively interested in international business	0.727		
	CM8: Every day we think about international business-related ideas	0.825		
SME Internationalisation	INT1: The time it took this company to make its first entry into international markets	0.931	0.876	0.706
	INT3: The number of foreign markets that the company is currently exporting to	0.890		
	INT4: The Percentage of foreign employees that are employed by this company	0.677		

Note(s): CR, Composite Reliability; AVE, Average Variance Explained

Source: Research data

Table 3: Discriminant Validity

	Compulsive Mindsets	Deliberative Mindsets	Implemental Mindsets	SME Internationalisation
Compulsive Mindsets				
Deliberative Mindsets	0.467			
Implemental Mindsets	0.648	0.523		
SME Internationalisation	0.312	0.105	0.491	

Note(s): Figures marked in bold indicate the HTMT values

Source: Research data

RESULTS

Sample Statistics

From the questionnaires received, the majority of the responses came from males (75.5%). The majority of the respondents had a bachelor's degree (45.5%). The majority of responses came from managers (78%), and the majority of the respondents had been exposed to international business operations for 1-5 years (42%). The majority of the SMEs were in the manufacturing sector (38.9%), had operated in international business for 6-10 years (37.5%), employed between 1-49 employees (59.5%), were exporting both directly and indirectly through intermediaries (45.8), were exporting to the East African community (32.6%), and most of the SMEs were fully domestically-owned (22.2%).

Hypothesis Testing Results

An PLS-SEM technique was used to test the hypotheses. The PLS-SEM technique was adopted for this purpose since there is growing evidence that it is a better technique at revealing the strength and direction of the relationships among the study variables than correlation coefficients in structural equation models; it also avoids estimation biases common in regression analysis (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). In addition, it is less demanding on sample size (Henseler *et al.*, 2015; Hernandez-Perlines *et al.*, 2021). The structural model in Figure 2 indicates the strength and the direction of the relationships.

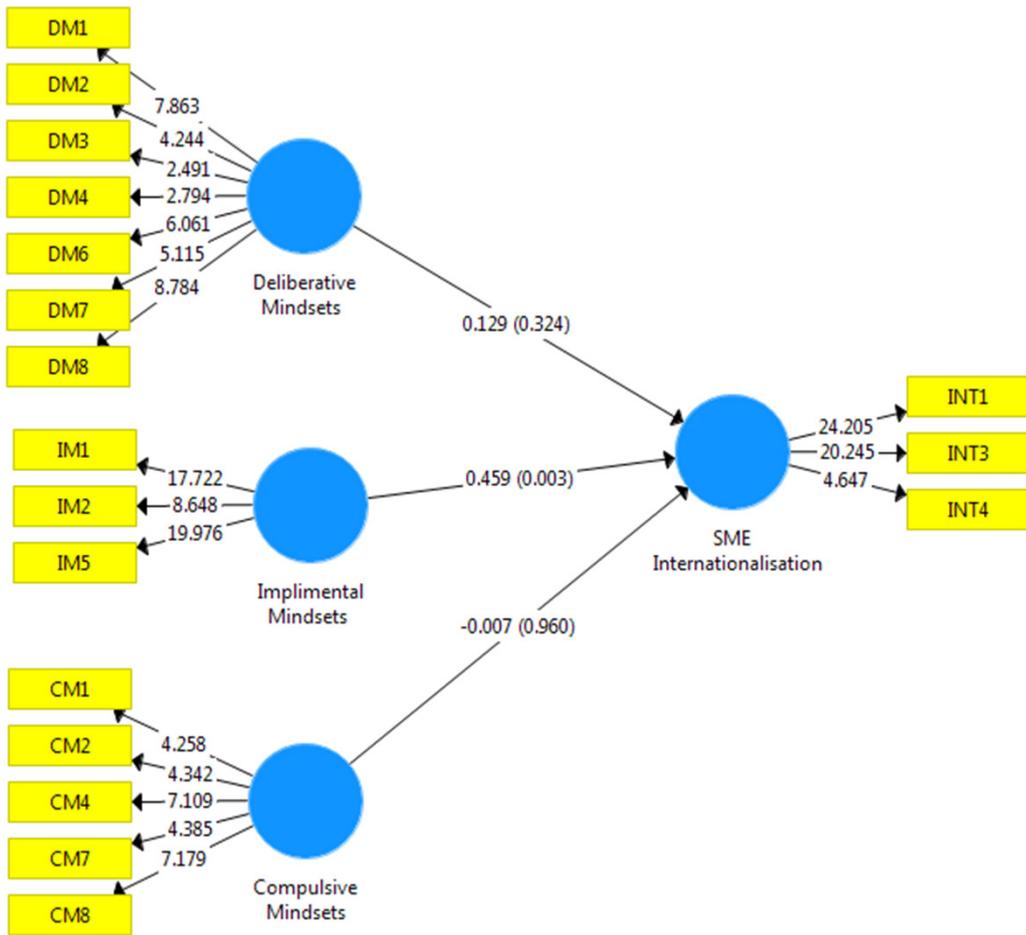


Figure 2: Structural Model Specifying the Relationship between the Study Variables

Note(s): P is significant at 0.01 (two-tailed)

Source: Research data

Figure 2 indicates the results for the study’s hypotheses. The results indicate that deliberative mindsets do not predict SME internationalisation ($B = 0.129$, P (two-tailed) >0.01). This means H1 was not supported. H2, that states that implimental mindsets have a significant relationship with SME internationalisation, was supported and was positive ($B = 0.459$, P (two-tailed) <0.01). Hypothesis 3, that states that compulsive mindsets have a significant relationship with SME internationalisation, was not supported ($B = -0.007$, P (two-tailed) >0.01).

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that among the many forms of entrepreneurial mindset, it is only the implemental mindsets that significantly predicted SME internationalisation. Essentially, this means that entrepreneurs who put emphasis on relevant information, possess the necessary know how, and pursue the perceived opportunities with agility are well-positioned to increase the level of international participation among their respective firms. This finding is synonymous with earlier submissions by Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) who argued that forming implemental mindsets enhances the accessibility of specific entrepreneurial opportunities over and beyond barely forming intentions to act. Our finding is also consistent with the submissions by Lindstrand and Hanell (2017) who acknowledge that actions that are related to the exploitation of international business opportunities greatly contribute to firm growth and international expansion of SMEs. This suggests that SMEs with managers/owners that are action-oriented are more likely to achieve higher levels of internationalisation.

The relationship between deliberative mindsets and SME internationalisation was not significant. This means that continuous deliberations on the viability of competing opportunities in international markets will not increase SME internationalisation. This finding is in line with earlier views by Armor and Taylor (2003) who posited that mere considerations of the pros and cons of pursuing an idea render one less likely to take any step, or slows down the steps that are eventually taken. In agreement, Mathisen and Arnulf (2013) concur and point out that while elaborating mindsets are an important first step towards pursuing a particular goal, actions may need to be taken to make sure that the pre-conceived goal becomes a reality.

The findings also disclosed that compulsive mindsets were not significantly related to SME internationalisation. This means that owners and managers who find it hard to control their thoughts about international business, keep thinking about international expansion more often; they get distracted by international business ideas that unexpectedly pop up at any time. The finding is consistent with earlier submissions by Mathisen and Arnulf (2014) that seem to suggest that being obsessed about an idea without the necessary resources may not lead to any serious business outcome.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study addresses the issues of SME internationalisation from a cognitive perspective in a sub-Saharan country where studies of such nature are sparse. This paper draws its inspiration from the Mindset Theory of Action Phases (MTAP) that postulates that the pursuit of goals is made up of different phases and each phase is characterised by distinct cognitive processes that contribute to goal completion. Specifically, the study finds that among all the dimensions of entrepreneurial mindset (deliberative mindsets, implemental mindsets, and compulsive mindsets), it is only the

implemental mindsets that are relevant in SME internationalisation. Therefore, this paper offers several implications.

First, from a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the understanding and conceptualisation of the entrepreneurial mindset. The study deviates from most entrepreneurial mindset studies that have conceptualised it (Davis *et al.*, 2016; Ahmetoglu *et al.*, 2011), and bases itself on the mindset theory of action phases to argue that an entrepreneurial mindset is a cognitive concept and can be operationalised based on deliberative mindsets, implemental mindsets, and compulsive mindsets.

From the managerial perspective, our results reveal that successful SME internationalisation in Sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly in Uganda, can be achieved by entrepreneurs who have implemental mindsets. In the context of this study, the study implies that for successful international expansion, owners and managers of exporting SMEs must always put emphasis on the relevant foreign market information, should ensure that they have the necessary know-how, and should continuously position themselves to seize the perceived opportunities in international markets.

Policy-wise, it is evident from our findings that successful international participation requires managers and owners who can take advantage of the available opportunities. Therefore, it is contingent upon the government of Uganda to simplify opportunity exploitation by SMEs. In particular, the government needs to develop information structures in relevant bodies such as the Uganda Export Promotions Board and in the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Cooperatives (MTIC) from where SMEs can easily access information regarding the international market opportunities. This will subsequently help exporting SMEs not only to spot opportunities but also produce and provide products that will meet the specific needs of the target export markets.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is subject to limitations that also reveal directions for future research. First, given that the results are from exporting SMEs in Uganda, the extent to which they can be generalised to firms from other Sub-Saharan countries is not known. Therefore, replicating the study to other countries in the same region is necessary to cross-validate the results reported in this study. Second, a standard questionnaire was adopted to generate responses from the target respondents; this limits the information only to the structured questions contained in the survey instrument. Future research may wish to use a qualitative approach that utilises in-depth interviews to get a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurial mindset influences SME internationalisation. Finally, the utilisation of the cross-sectional research design in this study limits the ability to capture the dynamic nature of the relationships over time. Therefore, a longitudinal research design could be utilised in the future to capture the dynamic behaviour of the relationships over time. Despite the limitations, this study's results remain useful to both academicians and policy-makers in and exporting SMEs in Uganda.

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