Sme internationalisation and network relationship development in the western african context:

The case of the ghanaian clothing and textile industry.

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Abstract

Research on the Internationalization of SMEs from Western African Economies is an under researched area both in theory and practice. Several researchers have thus suggested the need to extend the internationalization literature so it takes into account the specific requirements of developing economies from Africa.

The objective of the study is to understand how Ghanaian SMEs in the clothing and textile industry internationalises using a network approach and to explore the influence of the network relationships on the internationalization process. The study concentrates on the internationalisation and network relationship development during the years 2000-2012. Thus two main issues are the focus of this study; How the foreign network relationships develops by identifying the relevant actors within the network, their activities, resources and critical event that forms this development Secondly, an attempt is made to understand how the network relationship development (ARA) and the critical events embedded in this development act to influence the internationalization process of the studied SMEs.

Methodologically the study will be based on an abductive qualitative multiple case study involving 4 cases which focuses on Ghanaian focal firms and their respective network relationships as the firms expands into the European and the USA market. It is a longitudinal research process involving a retrospective historical reconstruction of data and event follow up analysis which covers a period of time from 2000-2012. Empirically the study will focus on Ghanaian SMEs in the clothing and textile industry. Theoretically the study is limited to the Network Internationalization approach (Johanson & Mattsson 1988, 1992, 1995, 2009; Håkansson & Snehota 2002).

This study is expected to contribute to the internationalization and network research on Western Africa by highlighting the dynamics and significance of network relationships on the internationalization process of Ghanaian SMEs and to develop an Internationalization conceptual model that incorporates the concept of critical events and time. From a methodological point of view, the expected contribution is to provide a description, analysis and use of the qualities of a research design based on a longitudinal process for studying the influence of network relationships on SMEs internationalization process in the Western African context particularly Ghana. The expected conclusions and results from this study may also benefit the policy makers and practitioners within the industry. Both theoretical and practical issues have motivated this study.

Keywords: Influence, Network relationship Developments SMEs, Critical events, Internationalization process
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Network relationships are an important source of competitive advantage for firms. Firms enter business relationships and networks in order to exploit and develop their resources and to create and maintain competitive advantage (Möller & Hallinen 1999). Network relationships may thus be developed for a number of reasons such as to achieve flexibility, capacity and speed in seizing opportunities, to access resources, skills and information and to provide a hedge against uncertainties (Faulkner 2003; Ebers 1997). The impact of network relationships has also been highlighted in SME internationalization process (Meyer & Skak 2000). According to Nummela (2001a), effective usage of networks facilities SMEs internationalization. Networking with various actors both locally and internationally and other third actors also play a vital role in the internationalization process of firms from African economies. (Habiyakare 2009)

Further, the increasing important role played by Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in driving economic development and job creation has resulted in a growing interest in the study of international operations of SMEs. (Ruzzier et. al, 2006; Lu & Beamish, 2006; Kula & Tatoglu, 2003; Raynard & Forstater, 2002). It is therefore apparent for SMEs that competing globally is not a mere option but an economic imperative. This trend is not only expected to create a radically altered competitive environment for all economies but also implication for the process of internationalization that SMEs undergo (Rutashoby & Jaensson 2004).

Thus globalization and its pull and push factors have increased pressure to firms of all sizes to extend their operations beyond domestic markets. (Coveillo & McAuley; 1999; Knight 2000; Hollenstein 2005). One important development of the past years has been the increasing important of developing markets role in the world economy. Such market economies are increasingly utilizing incentive systems (liberalization) to assisting domestic companies to operate on a global platform. (Raynard & Forstater 2002). SMEs from developing markets in Africa have started undertaking international activities in developed countries and so have SMEs from developed countries increased internationalization activities in developing markets thus an increasing amount of world investment has moved towards these areas due to the decline in market barriers and globalisation making developing markets an attraction for foreign investment. (Cavusgil, Ghauri & Agarwal 2002). The recognition of this role has also come from international organisations such as UNIDO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that recommends integration of global economy through economic liberalization and deregulation as the best ways to overcome poverty and inequality in developing countries. (Raynard & Forstater 2002).

The Ghanaian regional economy is driven by SMEs and therefore, governments within this region are keen to grow this sector and expand its export potential. Historically SMEs international growth within the African region has been hampered by the existence of stringent foreign exchange regulations, limited governmental support, little foreign competition, a domestic focus by SME firm management and relatively low quality standards both in terms of product and production technology compared to international competitors. (Kuada 2000; Mitgwe 2005; Ibeh & Young 2001). However with the unrelenting pressure of globalisation as well as the new political and economic dispensation within the Ghanaian region, there has been a fundamental shift in favour of SMES internationalization. Both governmental policy and support instruments within the country and as well as the behaviour of SMEs themselves within the Ghanaian region have improved significantly. (www.investinghana.org.) The Ghanaian government has thus acknowledged SMEs as a key source of domestic income growth and employment creation.
Further, the Ghanaian clothing and textile sector has over the few years dominated the manufacturing sector and contributed significantly to livelihood. The textile sub sector in Ghana has received international support (www.investinghana.org, www.agoa.info) and has also been an important source of foreign exchange in Ghana (www.investinghana.org, Ghana Ministry of trade and industry website; www.moti-ghan.com). For example, over the past few years, the textile sector has shown considerable interest to increase production for the local market and also to take advantage of the opportunities provided under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). AGOA is a United States Federal Government legislation that significantly liberalizes market access to the United States for 37 designated Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. Under AGOA, thousands of locally made products from at least 21 African countries including Ghana are exported to the US market under duty-free, quota-free system. The clothing and textile sector for instance, benefits from a duty-free cost advantage of 33 per cent. Currently, Ghana accounts for about 95 per cent of all AGOA textile and apparel exports from West Africa. (www.agoa.info).

Again, Ghana’s main economic policy objective is to achieve middle-income status by 2015, to reduce corruption and mismanagement in firms and the economy as a whole. Goals for elimination of these economic problems would imply substantial poverty reduction by supporting businesses, promoting regional and global integration and export diversification and establishing a business and investment climate that encourages and allows foreign firms, private sector-led growth, and privatizing remaining state-owned enterprises several of which are significant budget liabilities. The textile sector therefore has the potential of accelerating growth in the industrial sector and the economy as a whole. The presence of the clothing and textile industries in the developing economies of West Africa particularly Ghana has helped to create the necessary industrial take off; job generation and poverty reduction and has therefore become one of the main priority areas of the Ghanaian government. Thus from a more contextualised angle this research is important to study due to the importance of the clothing and textile industry for the developing economies from Africa. The Ghanaian government has also used a combination of incentives since year 2001 to improve its investment climate and the clothing and textile industry by providing additional support for these SMEs to participate in the President’s Special Initiative for Apparel. (www.investinghana.org).

In the light of the above discussion, there is a definite a need for the present study to expose international business opportunities and challenges from Western African market economies particularly the Ghanaian clothing and textile industry. It is important to study the influencing factors or drivers of growth in the industry.

1.2. Research problem and gap

Since Johanson and Vahlnes internationalization study in (1977), the Internationalization process of firms has gained popularity among researchers. Much research has gone on to assess what differentiates exporters from non exporters and why some firms export while other are less involved. To understand this, a plethora of studies has been conducted from various points of view. These studies have looked at factors such as internationalization motives, organizational perspectives, owner/manager perspectives, growth of the firm. There have also been several studies on SMEs and network internationalization (Johanson & Mattsson 1988; Blankenburg Holm 1995; Fletcher 2001, 2008; Fletcher & Barrett 2001; Ghauri et al. 2003; Meyer & Skak 2002; Nummela 2002a; Chetty & Blankburg 2000; Chetty & Campbell-Hunt 2003, 2004). Further, these different schools of thought and their main contribution have been tested in different market and were found
to be applicable to most market. Surprisingly there are a limited number of empirical researches which deals directly with African business issues thus contextual studies have concentrated mainly on developed markets. As a result much is known about the internationalization process, opportunities and challenges of firms in developed countries, however only a handful of studies have been conducted in developing countries from Africa. (Mtigwe 2005; Habiyakare 2009). Although their theoretical relevance cannot be underestimated, the result is that policy measures that are applied to SMEs from Africa particularly as they relate to the motivation and support of export behaviour are based on foreign and mainly European models of a firm internationalization that may be questionable relevance to the African context. Thus even if there has been numerous studies on SMEs and network internationalization relatively little academic research has been published concerning this field of research in the specific context of Western African small –to medium sized enterprise(SMEs). The limited geographical coverage of the Internationalization studies is one of the weaknesses in the literature on international business in the light of the increasing involvement, trade and integration of African firms in global economic activities. The need to help address this weakness is one of the motivations for this research.

Nevertheless in relation to internationalization from African economies, a few studies have highlighted the significance and usage of networks, for instance Awuah (1994) studied how the capabilities of local firms sub contracting to a multinational located in Ghana developed through their market relationship. Owusu (2002, 2003) suggest that project marketing by industrial firms that were not ready to invest in the African market could provide valuable knowledge of the African market and relations on which could later build for greater involvement. Their interaction with the African firms could develop each firm’s international marketing capabilities. He analysed the business relationships in the context of networks and capabilities, which are relevant factors from the perspective of this study. Habiyakare (2009) highlighted the significance and usage of networks in FME in African economies and importance of integrating timing and critical events in the foreign market expansion to African economies. In spite of the relevant and usefulness of these studies examples, most of these previous studies have concentrated on Multinationals and internationalization from developed markets to developing economies while the other side of the coin network influence and SMEs internationalization studies from developing economies in Africa to developed market economies has been limitedly studied. Since the current research interest is on the influence of network relationships on SMEs internationalization from Western African context, the review of previous studies focuses on this context. Thus it is important to mention some contribution at this point. Kuada and Sorensen (2000) studied 20 export companies in Ghana from processed food items and the manufactured items sector. In their study they argued that the contemporary theories of internationalization (e.g. the so called Uppsala model) were of limited relevance in explaining and guiding the internationalization process of Ghanaian firms. The empirical evidence of their study challenged the conventional perception that firms start their internationalization process by exporting to nearby, culturally similar markets. Ibeh (2003) in his study addressed the usage of networks in African SMEs Internationalization which brings in the importance of this study.

However despite the useful contribution of these studies, the influence of network relationships on the internationalization process in the context of Western African SMEs particularly Ghanaian SMEs has not been studied in any significant depth. First there is limited understanding of the dynamics and developments of the networks relationship, particularly with regards to the role of the network actors, and their influence on the internationalization process. Second, critical events that are embedded in the network development process are not integrated or seen as important element in the internationalization process model of the previous internationalization and network studies in the Western African Context. This is rather surprising because internationalisation is generally
understood as an evolutionary process (e.g., Calof & Beamish 1995). According to Törnroos and Elo (2005), to understand firms internationalization development, process and activities, the respective critical events needs to be identified. Again, a few methodological concerns must be registered about the previous network and internationalization studies in the context of Western African SMEs. First of all it is worth noting that a longitudinal process has been rare in these previous studies.

Further there is the need for more contextual empirical studies to ascertain how networks and relationships have influence SMEs internationalization within the Western African context. Existing and previous empirical studies regarding this field of study has focused on the agricultural and food industry. According to Mtigwe (2005), a weakness in previous studies on the subject of firm’s internationalization from Africa has been their narrow focus in terms of the industry studied and the factors examined and thus recommend future research in relation to other industries and context. From all the industries, there seem to be lack of research regarding the Ghanaian clothing and textile Industry. This study therefore addresses a knowledge gap in respect of the influence of Business network relationship development on the internationalization process in the context of Ghanaian SMEs in the clothing and textile industry.

Thus I can affirm that research on SMEs internationalization from Western African Economies particularly the influence of network relationships on the internationalization process of Ghanaian SMEs in the clothing and textile industry is an under researched area both in theory and practice. African markets therefore deserve more attention than they have enjoyed so far to date. There is a definite need to extend the internationalization literature so that it takes into account the specific requirements of developing economies from West Africa. (Kuada & Sörensen 2000; Habiyakare 2009; Bruton et al. 2008).

1.2. Objective of the study

The objective of the study is ‘the objective of the study is to understand how Ghanaian SMEs in the clothing and textile industry internationalises using a network approach and to explore the influence of the network relationships on the internationalization process’.

1.3. Research questions

- To understand SMEs internationalization from the developing economies of West Africa by using a network approach.
- To describe the development of the network relationship over a period of time from 2000-2012.
- To identify and analyse critical events which has shaped the network relationship development of the studied SMEs.
- To present theoretical, managerial and policy implication in order to promote SMEs internationalization from Ghana.
1.4. Expected contribution and Relevance of the study
Relevance / Contribution

- Expected Contribution to literature:
  - Contribute to the internationalization and network research on Western Africa by highlighting the dynamics and significance of business network relationships on the internationalization process of Ghanaian SMEs and to develop an Internationalization conceptual model that incorporates the concept of critical events and time.
  - Methodologically provide a description, analysis and use of the qualities of a research design based on a longitudinal process for studying the influence of network relationships on SMEs internationalization process in the Western African context particularly Ghana

- Policy makers, Practitioners, Researchers
  - Assist in guiding policy decisions within the West African region
  - Provide policy makers with insight if they are to assess or opt for competitive policies to help promote trade with and in West Africa
  - Provide insight for SMEs practitioners within the West African region on how to enhance their network involvement.
  - Assist in the discovery of what needs to be done to unlock the full potential of SMEs on global economics
  - For researcher, this study may be useful for generating new ideas and or discover relevant research issues.
  - From a more contextualised angle this research is relevant and important to study due to the importance of the textile industry for newly developing economies from Africa. The presence of such industries in these developing parts of the world has helped to create the necessary economic growth, employment generation and poverty reduction especially in Africa.
  - From a micro perspective, SMEs in the Ghanaian clothing and textile industry are growing at a faster rate and they are viewed as vehicles of innovation, employment, social and cultural regeneration. The importance of this is seen in Ghana regarding governmental and international attempt to support this industry.

1.5. Research Focus, Limitations and Perspective

The study concentrates on the internationalisation and network relationship development during the years 2000-2012 (see fig.1). Thus two main issues are the focus of this study; how the foreign network relationships develop by identifying the relevant actors within the network, their activities, resources and critical event that forms this development. Secondly, an attempt is made to understand how the network relationship development (ARA) and the critical events embedded in this development act to influence the internationalization process. (Market, entry mode) of the studied SMEs. To make the study manageable, the study will concentrate on network relationship development of the focal firms (Ghanaian clothing and textile SMEs) in a particular market context and that as such describes a part of the firms’ internationalization process. In this study internationalization is seen from a network view, through interaction and activity relationship structure.
Methodologically, the study is a qualitative case study, which focuses on Ghanaian focal firms and its respective network relationships as it expands into the European and the USA market. The development process is examined through historical reconstruction and event follow up analysis. Thus the Industry case is based on a longitudinal case research and the research follows the development of the firm and its network relationship through a focal actor viewpoint. This perspective in order to simplify the studies as according to Hedaa and Törnroos (1997) setting of boundaries in network studies is essential. Thus the core of the network relationship development is constructed around the focal firms (Ghanaian SMEs in the clothing and textile industry) and their relationships with foreign network actors and the process of study remains on long term network relationships. The actors are identified during the preliminary data collection phase in spring 2011.

Empirically the study will focus on Ghanaian SMEs in the clothing and textile industry. It will focus on SMEs which are either manufacturing or value adding to their products and excludes companies that are purely retail SMEs. Further Case firms should fulfil the definition of an SME define in this study, Case firms will involve SMEs with long term ongoing network relationships and already in the process of Internationalization since 2000 and SMEs that has been able to penetrate developed market economies. (E.g. USA, Europe). These criteria were chosen so in order to find internationally active firms that are interaction with local and foreign actor and also to make the data manageable and to simplify the studies. Justification for focusing on Ghana is because Ghana is a stable economy, also due to the relevance of the context/industry for the Ghanaian economy, Lack of empirical studies, Nationality of the researcher as a Ghanaian and hence accessibility of the data.
Fig. 1. The focus of the study

Network relationship Development

Actors, Activities, Resource

Critical events

Influence on the internationalization process (Ghanaian clothing and textile SMEs)
1.4. Research approach, method and data collection

Methodologically, the study is an abductive, qualitative process-based research. It uses a longitudinal multiple case study as a research design to explore and describe the network development process, critical events and influence factors from a time period of 2000-2012. Thus the process view in this study will involve both a retrospective and a future follow up events character. The strategy of this research is descriptive and explorative as it attempts to provide a description of the firm and its network development process. The methodological choice can be justified by several reasons.

A longitudinal process offers the possibility to obtain very rich description of the development process and events. Van de Ven and Poole (1995). Also the research questions and the theoretically pre-knowledge highlight a general need for a longitudinal study. The retrospective studies offers the opportunity to identify pattern indicative of dynamic events and the longitudinal follow up of events will provides a close –up view of those pattern as they evolve over time. (Nummela 2002) The combination of these two will hopefully enhance validity. However the most significant limitation of a retrospective studies is the difficulty of determining cause and effect from reconstructed events. In a retrospective study participant or informants may not have recognised an event as important when it happened and thus may not recall it afterwards. For this reason simultaneously with the retrospective data collection, I will conduct two follow up study of event collecting data on the developments or changes, critical events analysis in relation to the firms’ internationalization process and its network relationships. Also the purest form of a longitudinal study namely daily participant observation will not be feasible due to the location of the case companies since I can only visit Ghana once a year during the period of this study. The methodological strategy; abduction, being a mix of deduction and induction (Alvesson & Sköldeberg, 1994; Janson, 1994a) enables the researcher to go back and forth between theory and empirical data as the research evolves. (Gummesson 1991, 2000). The final aim is to create a solid theoretical and empirical base at the same time as strengthening the practical validation of the research, by making the results relevant for organization and society. A multiple case study allows for a multiple source and unit of analysis which is beyond that offered by a single case study. Case study is the most appropriate methodology for research in networks since it takes into account the embedded character of network relationships and allows for identification of the casual forces influencing the actors, behaviour and network creation. Further case study method and its characteristics as a tool for studies on business networks. Halinen and Törnroos (2005), Dubois-
Gadde (2002) the quantitative research approach emphasizes on transforming the data to numbers, quantities and statistical models for the purpose of measurement and analysis. With a qualitative research approach, a researcher focuses on gaining a better understanding of the research problem through detailed information about the subject matter. One essential aim of this research approach is to have a complete and detailed description and understanding of the subject through the application of reasoning. Qualitative research often involves interviews and observations without formal measurement. (Yin 2003, Ghauri et al. 2005). Given the aim of this study, a qualitative research approach will be used in this study to gather more information and describe the situations involving the process. According to Yin 2003, the tradition of a case study belongs to a qualitative tradition and thus forms the special research strategy.

**Data collection**

To investigate the network relationship development, face to face interviews will be conducted with the founders and managers who had been most responsible for managing the companies’ internationalisation. The first preliminary data collection phase will be in spring 2011. The main data collection will be in autumn 2011 and 2012 respectively. In addition to conducting personal interviews, Secondary data such as Archival documentation from the companies and information collected from databases, such as news articles, and annual reports will also be used. Data collection will have a retrospective and follow up character as data will be collected after the developments and events has already taken place and also the follow up events will provide an analysis and description of developments including events which has taken place simultaneously during the research period. Owner managers will be asking to look back and describe the network relationship development during the time period in question (2000-2012). The justification for limiting the study to this time period is that it was during 2000 that most of the Global/foreign network actors and governmental support had been initiated to support the Ghanaian clothing and textile industry (www.agoa.org) based on the pre knowledge of the researcher and also 2012 will be the last data collection and analysis phase for this study. Further, limiting the study to this period of time is important in order to make the data manageable and also to simplify the studies. Fig 2 illustrates the overall research process for this study.
1.5. Definition of key concept

- **Network relationships Development**

Network is usually defined as a set of connected exchange relationships (Johansson & Mattsson 1988). Johanson and Mattsson 1988 conclude that a general definition of a business network is companies combining together with a common objective, working together and cooperating to exchange and share ideas, knowledge and technology. According to Törnroos (2003), firms gradually extend their network connections through their commitment to technology and financial ties with other market actors. The network tradition defines relationship as mutually oriented interaction between two or many reciprocally committed parties (Hånkinson & Snehota 1995). The perspective applied in this study assumes that a relationship is a process overtime creating interdependencies between actors such as e.g. organisational/institutions, individuals etc. Actors are involved with each other through activities and possession of specific resources. In this study network relationship development refers to the respective actors, their resources and activities as well as the critical events over a period of time.

- **Critical Events**

In this study an event is refers to an outcome of acts or changes caused either by human, political system or by nature within or outside the business environment’ (Törnroos & Hedaa 1997, p. 6).

- **Influence**

The term influence requires some further explanation because it is one key words of my research objective and research questions in this study, in this study influence refers to those stimuli or forces that trigger a certain critical event, change in relation to the market entry, mode choice (internationalization process).

- **Internationalization process**

Some researchers tend to describe ‘internationalization’ as the outward movement in a firm’s international operations (Turnbull, 1985; Johanson & Wiedersheim 1975). This common feature has been broadened further by considering ‘internationalization’ as a ‘sequential and orderly process of increased international involvement and the associated changes in organizational forms’ (Reid, 1981; Bilkey & Tesar 1977; Johanson & Vahlne 1977). Welch and Luostarinen (1988) suggest a
broader definition by including both sides of the process, defining internationalization as “the process of increasing involvement in international operation” (p.8). Later Beamish et al. (1990) suggested a new definition to cover the prior definition and findings; they defined internationalization as the process by which firms both increase their awareness of the direct and indirect influences of international transactions on their future, and establish and conduct transactions with other countries. In this study, I adopt definition suggested by Beamish et al. (1990) because it implies not only the dynamic and evolutionary nature of internationalization but also recognizes both behavioural and economic components of internationalization and allows for both inward and outward international activities. Finally, it implies that relationships established through international transaction influence the firms’ growth and expansion to other countries. Also since “internationalization process of firms is a multidimensional concept” (Luostarinen 1994, p.12), one should decide which dimensions of internationalization are of interest. In comparison with decisions such as type of product, number and quality of personnel, organization structure, and financial issues that are common activities in any growth strategy, “entry mode” and “market selection” are considered as the core components and distinctive features of internationalization and other types of growth strategies (Andersen 1997). Thus in this study the internationalization process will focus on the entry mode and markets.

• SME

According to the recommendation of the European Commission, Micro, Small and Medium-sized enterprises are defined according to their staff headcount and turnover or annual balance-sheet total. A micro enterprise is defined as an enterprise which employs fewer than 10 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 2 million. A small enterprise is defined as an enterprise which employs fewer than 50 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 10 million. A medium-sized enterprise is defined as an enterprise which employs fewer than 250 persons and whose annual turnover does not exceed EUR 50 million or whose annual balance-sheet total does not exceed EUR 43 million (http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/n26026.htm, European Communities,2003/361/EC 2003). In this study, the researcher will use the definition and classification given by the European commission above since this criterion, enables comparison of the findings of this study with a significant number of the internationalization studies conducted in European countries. Also though these limit figures differ from country to country, they do provide a harmonized system for defining the SME. More detailed regarding SMEs characteristics and benefit are discussed later in the literature review chapter of this study.
2. Theoretical Framework - Network Internationalisation Approach

Theoretically the study is limited to the Network Internationalization approach (Johanson & Mattsson 1988, 1992, 1995, 2009), Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP) Håkansson and Snehota 2002). The Network approach is selected as it assumed that the development takes place through the actors, their activities and resources. (A-R-A.). According to the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP), Internationalization is no longer solely influenced by the internal variables of the focal firm. It is also influenced by the firm’s network relationships with external entities. Thus internationalization takes place in a network setting, where different business actors are linked to each other through direct or indirect relationships (Johanson & Mattsson 1988, 1992, 1995; Håkansson & Snehota 2002). The IMP model of business network consists of three elements: actors, activities and resources. Håkansson and Snehota, (2000). The ARA model concentrates on the configuration of a business relationship: Activity links, resource ties and actor bonds. Actors are firms or individuals that perform activities and control resources. Actors perform activities, transactions and create value via transformation of resources. Håkansson and Snehota, (2000). The research setting is simplified into a framework (see fig 3).
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