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Rethinking Entrepreneurial Orientation in Emerging Economies: Dimension-Specific Effects on MSME Growth in Kenya

Isaac Ruto Katialem ⁽¹⁾ Robert Ingabo Otuya ⁽²⁾ Stella Isendi Muhanji ⁽³⁾ **Article History**

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(1,2,3) Kabarak University, Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate the influence of Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) on the growth of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Kenya, which, despite their significant contribution to employment and GDP, continue to face persistent growth barriers and high failure rates. EO—defined by innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, autonomy, and competitive aggressiveness—has been widely studied, but empirical evidence in Sub-Saharan Africa remains limited and context dependent. To address this gap, the study employed a sequential mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys of 284 MSMEs with qualitative interviews of 15 owners/managers. Correlation results indicated that proactiveness, risk-taking, and innovativeness were positively associated with growth, autonomy was negatively related, and competitive aggressiveness was weakly positive. Regression analysis confirmed proactiveness, innovativeness, and competitive aggressiveness as significant growth drivers, while autonomy exhibited a significant negative effect, and risk-taking was statistically non-significant. The overall model explained 60.2 per cent of the variance in MSME growth. Qualitative findings complemented these results by showing that risk-taking was often interpreted as survival-driven rather than strategic, and autonomy contributed to inefficiencies due to weak oversight. Conversely, innovativeness and proactiveness were consistently perceived as critical for survival and competitiveness. These findings highlight EO's heterogeneous and context-sensitive effects on MSME performance. The study contributes to theory by advancing a contextualised understanding of EO in emerging economies and provides practical insights for policy and management by recommending strategies to strengthen innovation, proactiveness, and structured autonomy among MSMEs.

Key words: Competitiveness, entrepreneurial orientation, growth, innovativeness, MSMEs proactiveness, risk-taking.



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INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are central to global economic development, driving employment, innovation, and poverty reduction (OECD, 2023; Kot et al., 2020). In Kenya, MSMEs contribute substantially to GDP and job creation, yet their growth is constrained by systemic challenges. Limited access to credit, institutional and policy instability, infrastructural gaps, and intense competition from both formal and informal enterprises continue to undermine their survival and expansion (KNBS, 2022; Kithae et al., 2012; Lagat & Njaramba, 2024). Empirical studies highlight persistent barriers across financial, institutional, and market domains, with access to finance, utilities, and market information repeatedly identified as critical determinants of growth (Moyi, 2013; Shibia & Barako, 2017; Ndolo et al., 2018). Broader macroeconomic conditions, including exchange rate volatility and political instability, further exacerbate enterprise vulnerability (Wanjohi & Mugure, 2008). These challenges contribute to high business mortality rates, with three out of five MSMEs failing within their first few years of operation (KNBS, 2016; MITED, 2020; KIPPRA, 2021), jeopardising the realisation of Vision 2030 and weakening the sector's transformative potential.

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) refers to a firm's strategic posture encompassing innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, autonomy, and competitive aggressiveness, reflecting the extent to which firms engage in entrepreneurial processes, practices, and decision-making styles (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Schillo, 2011). EO is widely recognised as a key driver of firm growth. However, evidence remains inconsistent: while some studies confirm positive EO-performance relationships (Rauch et al., 2009; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005), others show weak or context-dependent effects (Moreno & Casillas, 2008; Andersén, 2010). Emerging economy contexts are particularly important, as institutional weaknesses, resource scarcity, and environmental volatility can alter the effectiveness of EO dimensions. For example, risk-taking may be detrimental where regulatory unpredictability heightens downside risks, whereas proactiveness may enhance adaptability by helping firms anticipate policy

shifts or market trends. Autonomy may foster decision-making agility under resource constraints, while competitive aggressiveness may backfire in informal markets characterised by thin margins. Recent African studies underscore EO's contextual nature: in Ghana, founders' strategic mindsets strongly shape EO outcomes (Lanivich et al., 2025), while in South Africa, technological opportunism enhances innovation under EO (Urban & Maphumulo, 2021). In Kenya, innovativeness and proactiveness have emerged as significant determinants of SME growth (Musimbi et al., 2025; Musyoka & Kyule, 2024), underscoring the need for a multidimensional approach.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the dimensional effects of EO on MSME growth in Kenya through a sequential mixed-methods design. By integrating quantitative and qualitative insights, the study seeks to determine the influence of innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, autonomy, and competitive aggressiveness on firm growth. This multidimensional assessment contributes to a deeper understanding of how strategic orientations operate in resource-constrained, institutionally volatile contexts, thereby offering both theoretical refinement and practical insights for strengthening MSME resilience in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), defined by Lumpkin and Dess (1996) as encompassing innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, autonomy, and competitive aggressiveness, has long been viewed as a central driver of firm growth. However, the EO-performance relationship has been contested, with findings ranging from positive and robust (Rauch et al., 2009; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005) to weak or context-dependent (Moreno & Casillas, 2008; Andersén, 2010). In emerging economies such as Kenya, this debate is particularly salient given institutional weaknesses, environmental volatility, and resource scarcity, all of which shape how EO dimensions manifest in practice.

Innovativeness has consistently emerged as a critical dimension in African and Kenyan contexts.

In South Africa, Oni et al. (2019) demonstrated that innovativeness significantly drives SME growth, aligning with Tanzanian evidence by Ringo et al. (2022), which confirmed its positive role in export performance. In Kenya, Waithaka (2017) showed innovativeness as the most influential predictor of SME performance in agro-based manufacturing, explaining 69.4 per cent of performance variance. More recent studies reinforce this: Kiiru et al. (2023) in the animal feed sector and Musyoka and Kyule (2024) in Machakos SMEs both confirm that innovation culture is directly linked to sales, profitability, and market expansion. These findings underscore innovativeness as a cornerstone for MSME growth in Kenya, consistent with global evidence but grounded in sectoral and resource-specific realities.

The role of risk-taking, however, remains contested. While Gathoni et al. (2021) found that risk-taking significantly contributes to MSE growth in Kiambu County, other African studies complicate this view. For example, Oni et al. (2019) reported a positive but weaker association, while Tanzanian evidence (Ringo et al., 2022) suggests that excessive risk may harm performance under volatile export conditions. Nigerian studies (Isichei et al., 2020; Yunusa et al., 2022) consistently find risk-taking to be insignificant, and similar results emerge in Botswana (Khwae, 2024). In Kenya, Machuki (2021) reported a positive role of risk-taking in small-scale farming, while Kariuki and Mungai (2024) found it strongly predictive of SME performance in Nairobi. The variation suggests that contextual contingencies—sector, market informality, and regulatory uncertainty—determine whether risk-taking enhances or undermines performance.

Proactiveness appears to be more consistently beneficial across African contexts. Rauch et al. (2009) emphasised its role in anticipating demand and seizing opportunities, findings echoed in South African SMEs (Oni et al., 2019). In Kenya, Cheruiyot and Mang'ana (2023) demonstrated that proactive strategies significantly drive growth in Eldoret MSEs, while Musyoka and Kyule (2024) found an exceptionally strong correlation between proactiveness and SME performance ($r = 0.874$). Onyango et al. (2024) similarly showed that

proactiveness improves resilience in the public transport sector. Even when Tanzanian research (Ringo et al., 2022) revealed a negative effect of proactiveness on export profitability, the finding highlights the importance of contextual fit, suggesting that being overly proactive in highly uncertain environments may lead to resource misallocation. For Kenyan MSMEs, however, proactiveness appears to be a central growth lever.

Autonomy, though less studied, has yielded mixed results. International evidence (e.g., Oni et al., 2019; Usoroh, 2021) often shows weak or insignificant relationships between autonomy and firm performance. Yet Kenyan findings suggest a stronger role. Waithaka (2017) found autonomy explained 42.5 per cent of SME performance variance in Kiambu, while Osore et al. (2020) reported that autonomy contributes to competitiveness in Kenya's banking sector. Conversely, George (2025) in Tanzania found autonomy insignificant. These contradictions suggest autonomy may matter more in Kenyan MSMEs, where decision-making agility is vital under resource constraints, but its effects are sector-specific.

Finally, competitive aggressiveness remains the least consistent EO dimension. Studies in Nigeria (Aigboje, 2018; Abdullahi et al., 2019) show strong positive effects, while Tanzanian evidence (Kapaya et al., 2018) suggests insignificance. In Kenya, Waithaka (2017) reported a strong correlation in agro-manufacturing SMEs, while Kariuki and Mungai (2024) confirmed its significant effect in Nairobi SMEs. These findings highlight a paradox: while aggressiveness may be advantageous in structured markets, in Kenya's informal and thin-margin sectors, excessive aggressiveness could backfire by triggering unsustainable price wars.

In summary, African and Kenyan studies reveal EO as a contextual and multidimensional construct, with innovativeness and proactiveness consistently fostering MSME growth, risk-taking producing ambivalent outcomes, autonomy yielding sector-contingent benefits, and competitive aggressiveness remaining equivocal. These insights highlight the need for Kenyan-

focused, multidimensional investigations that consider institutional volatility and sectoral heterogeneity. The current study addresses this by disaggregating EO into its five dimensions, employing a sequential mixed-methods approach to capture both measurable impacts and contextual nuances.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a sequential mixed-method design that integrated positivist, interpretivist, and pragmatic paradigms. The quantitative phase, rooted in positivism, emphasised establishing causal relationships between entrepreneurial orientation and firm growth through structured measurement and statistical testing. The qualitative phase, guided by interpretivist and pragmatic perspectives, explored participant experiences in greater depth to capture nuanced meanings often overlooked in surveys (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). This integration allowed positivism to provide statistical rigour, while interpretivism and pragmatism offered contextual understanding and practical relevance. Together, the paradigms strengthened validity and delivered a holistic perspective on the research problem.

Nairobi City County was selected as the study location because of its strategic significance as Kenya's capital and commercial hub. The city concentrates a wide spectrum of MSMEs, spanning both traditional manufacturing and innovation-driven startups, and mirrors the diversity of business activity, opportunities, and challenges found across the country. This makes Nairobi a representative and suitable setting for examining entrepreneurial orientation and enterprise growth.

The study focused on micro, small, and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises (MSMEs) registered with the Kenya Association of Manufacturers (KAM) and innovation-driven startups supported through grant programs. A sample of 284 firms was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations, ensuring representativeness of formally recognised

and active enterprises. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire measuring entrepreneurial orientation and firm growth. Analysis in SPSS Version 26.0 included descriptive statistics for data summarisation, factor analysis to validate constructs, and correlation and multiple regression to test hypothesised relationships. Reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs exceeding the 0.7 threshold. A pilot test further enhanced the content and face validity of the instrument.

The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected MSME owners and managers. Thematic analysis yielded interpretive insights that contextualised and clarified quantitative findings. This triangulation enhanced validity while illuminating the multifaceted dynamics of entrepreneurial orientation and firm growth.

Across both phases, ethical safeguards were strictly upheld. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage. These measures ensured compliance with research ethics and protected participant welfare throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the correlation and regression analyses, complemented by qualitative insights to aid interpretation of the quantitative findings. The correlation analysis (see Table 1) showed that proactiveness ($r = .631$), risk-taking ($r = .529$), and innovativeness ($r = .452$) were positively and significantly associated with MSME growth. Competitive aggressiveness also displayed a positive, though weaker, association ($r = .318$), while autonomy was significantly negative ($r = -.576$). These results suggested that EO dimensions were directionally related to growth, but their influence varied in strength. Importantly, no evidence of multicollinearity was detected, validating the regression analysis.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis

		MSME Growth	Innovation	Risk-taking	Proactiveness	Autonomy	Competitive Aggressiveness
MSME Growth	Pearson Correlation	1					
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
	N	247					
Innovation	Pearson Correlation	.452**					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
	N	247	247				
Risk-taking	Pearson Correlation	.529**	.145*				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.023				
	N	247	247	247			
Proactiveness	Pearson Correlation	.631**	.290**	.142*			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.026			
	N	247	247	247	247		
Autonomy	Pearson Correlation	-.576**	.220**	.170**	.481**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.007	.000		
	N	247	247	247	247	247	
Competitive Aggressiveness	Pearson Correlation	.318**	.127*	.377**	.122	.089	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.047	.000	.055	.162	
	N	247	247	247	247	247	247

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
 * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Regression findings (see Table 2) indicated that innovativeness ($\beta = .246, p < .001$), proactiveness ($\beta = .380, p < .001$), and competitive aggressiveness ($\beta = .219, p < .001$) significantly enhanced MSME growth.

Table 2: Overall Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.776a	0.602	0.594	0.51711

a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive Aggressiveness, Autonomy, Risk-taking, Innovativeness, Proactiveness

These results underscore the importance of forward-looking behaviour, innovation, and assertive competitive strategies as key levers for success in volatile markets. Owners and managers interviewed consistently framed innovativeness and proactiveness as survival mechanisms, describing how constant product adaptation and anticipation of customer needs enabled firms to remain competitive despite resource scarcity. Such qualitative accounts reinforce theoretical claims

that EO contributes to growth in uneven ways, shaped by environmental and organisational contexts.

Two unexpected findings also emerged. Risk-taking, while positively correlated with growth, was not a significant predictor in the regression model ($\beta = .022$, $p = .628$). Interviews revealed that risk-taking was framed in defensive terms—avoiding financial losses, piracy, or supply shortages—rather than opportunity seeking. This resonates with contextual firm growth perspectives (Khavul et al., 2009; Webb et al., 2011), which note that in resource-constrained environments, entrepreneurs often manage risk conservatively to preserve survival rather than pursue growth opportunities.

Most strikingly, autonomy exerted a negative and significant effect on growth ($\beta = -.323$, $p < .001$). While EO theory often associates autonomy with creativity and initiative (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996), qualitative evidence indicated that Kenyan MSMEs operate within high power-distance and collectivist cultural settings (Hofstede, 2001). Here, excessive decentralisation was viewed as disruptive, leading to inefficiencies, duplication, or fragmented effort. Centralised decision-making, though limiting autonomy, was seen as essential for coordination and resource discipline. This cultural framing clarifies why autonomy, typically growth-enhancing in Western contexts, undermined MSME performance in Nairobi.

Collectively, the EO dimensions (see Table 2) explained 59.4 per cent of the variance in MSME growth (Adj. $R^2 = .594$), highlighting EO as a powerful yet context-dependent driver of entrepreneurial success. The mixed evidence on risk-taking and autonomy reinforces Lumpkin and Dess's (1996) argument that EO dimensions are not universally beneficial, but rather contingent on contextual factors. Our findings extend this theoretical perspective by showing that in emerging economies, dimensions such as autonomy and risk-taking are shaped by cultural norms and resource constraints, producing effects on growth that diverge from those observed in more developed contexts.

Discussion

This study shows that entrepreneurial orientation (EO) dimensions do not exert uniform effects on MSME growth in Nairobi but instead operate in context-dependent ways. Innovativeness and proactiveness emerged as the most influential drivers of growth, underscoring their importance in dynamic and resource-constrained markets (Oni et al., 2019; Isichei et al., 2020). By continually adapting products and anticipating customer needs, MSMEs remain competitive despite scarcity, a finding consistent with EO theory (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996) and with evidence from emerging economies such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Tanzania (Ringo et al., 2022; Supeni et al., 2023; Waithaka, 2017).

In contrast, risk-taking, though positively associated with growth, was not a significant predictor. Interviews revealed that entrepreneurs tend to frame risk in defensive terms—focusing on avoiding losses, piracy, or supply shortages—rather than opportunity seeking. This resonates with contextual perspectives on firm growth (Khavul et al., 2009; Webb et al., 2011), which note that in volatile and resource-scarce settings, risk is often managed conservatively. Similar findings of insignificant or negative effects of risk-taking have been reported in Nigeria and the Netherlands (Isichei et al., 2020; Rezaei & Ortt, 2018), although other studies in Tanzania show positive effects in specific sectors (Bridget, 2022; George, 2025). These mixed results suggest that the growth value of risk-taking is highly dependent on sectoral and institutional conditions.

The negative effect of autonomy was especially striking. While autonomy is typically theorised as a driver of creativity and initiative (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996), the evidence here indicates that excessive independence undermines coordination and strategic coherence in Kenyan MSMEs. Cultural factors, such as high power distance and collectivist norms (Hofstede, 2001), may explain why centralised decision-making is viewed as necessary for discipline and efficiency. Comparable results have been observed in Tanzania (George, 2025) and Indonesia (Pratono et al., 2018), while studies in Nigeria and elsewhere report positive or mixed impacts (Usoroh, 2021).

This suggests that autonomy is not universally beneficial; its influence depends on cultural and organisational context.

Finally, competitive aggressiveness contributed positively to MSME growth, supporting prior findings that assertive competitive strategies are essential for business success in highly contested markets (George, 2025). In environments characterised by intense rivalry and limited customer loyalty, the ability to challenge competitors and exploit emerging opportunities appears vital for survival and expansion.

Taken together, these findings highlight EO as a multidimensional construct whose effects are contingent on cultural, institutional, and economic environments. While innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness enable firms to thrive under resource scarcity, risk-taking and autonomy may not yield similar benefits. This supports Lumpkin and Dess's (1996) argument that EO dimensions exert heterogeneous effects shaped by context. Building on this, the strong influence of innovativeness and proactiveness aligns with Schumpeterian entrepreneurship theory (Schumpeter, 1934), which positions innovation and forward-looking behaviour as engines of creative adaptation.

In contrast, risk-taking, while positively correlated with growth, was not a significant predictor. This diverges from the risk-taking theory of entrepreneurship (Cantillon, 1755/2010; Knight, 1921) and suggests that in resource-constrained contexts, entrepreneurs manage risk defensively to preserve survival, extending the theory into settings where opportunity seeking is secondary to loss avoidance. From a strategic management perspective, the results also contribute to the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) and Dynamic Capabilities (DC) frameworks (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). Innovativeness and proactiveness can be understood as valuable, rare, and inimitable resources that underpin competitive advantage, while the negative effect of autonomy highlights the contingent value of resources in high power-distance and collectivist contexts. Extending this, EO dimensions act as micro-foundations of

dynamic capabilities: proactiveness reflects *sensing* opportunities, innovativeness reflects *seizing*, and competitive aggressiveness reflects *reconfiguring* market positions. Together, these insights position EO as both a resource and a capability, whose growth effects depend not only on firm-level orientation but also on cultural and institutional conditions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study shows that entrepreneurial orientation (EO) dimensions exert heterogeneous effects on MSME growth in Nairobi. Innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness significantly enhance performance, while risk-taking does not exert a meaningful influence, and autonomy negatively affects growth. These findings challenge the common assumption that EO uniformly benefits firms and highlight the importance of adopting a multidimensional perspective. Theoretically, the study advances EO research by extending Lumpkin and Dess's (1996) framework and demonstrating that the benefits of EO are contingent on context. Cultural factors such as collectivism and high power distance may diminish the value of autonomy, while economic volatility and resource scarcity limit the positive impact of risk-taking. This emphasises that EO is not a universal recipe for firm success but a context-dependent construct shaped by institutional, cultural, and market conditions. Practically, the study provides guidance for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and enterprise support agencies in Kenya. For entrepreneurs, foresight, adaptability, and competitive assertiveness emerge as critical strategies for survival and growth. For policymakers, the findings point to the need for targeted interventions that strengthen innovation and opportunity recognition, while also building systems that help firms manage risk productively and coordinate decision-making effectively.

Recommendations: Based on the findings, several recommendations can be drawn for entrepreneurs and policymakers. For MSME owners and managers, the results suggest that greater emphasis should be placed on innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness as key levers for firm growth. At the same time, caution is required

in how autonomy and risk-taking are applied in practice. Excessive autonomy without proper coordination can lead to inefficiencies and misaligned initiatives, while unstructured risk-taking may expose firms to vulnerabilities in already volatile markets. Entrepreneurs should therefore balance independence with structured oversight and adopt risk management strategies that align with their resource capacities and market realities. For policymakers and enterprise support agencies, the findings highlight the importance of designing programs that strengthen innovation

capabilities, opportunity recognition, and competitive positioning among MSMEs. In parallel, support structures such as training, mentorship, and governance frameworks should be established to help firms manage risks productively and ensure accountability in decision-making. Financial inclusion initiatives and targeted capacity-building programs can further enhance the resilience of MSMEs, enabling them to navigate resource constraints and institutional weaknesses more effectively.

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