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Kujala, Irene; Owusu, Richard Afriyie

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Institutional actors, policy and internationalisation of emerging market SMEs: lessons from AGOA and the Ghanaian Textile Industry

Irene Kujala*

Faculty of Social Sciences, Business and Economics,
Äbo Akademi University,
Asa, Vänrikinkatu 3 B, Turku, Finland
Email: ikujala@abo.fi
*Corresponding author

Richard Afriyie Owusu

School of Business and Economics,
Linnaeus University,
Pedelstråket 11, 392 31, Kalmar, Sweden
Email: richard.owusu@lnu.se

Abstract: This paper focuses on the roles of institutional actors and their policies in promoting the internationalisation of Ghanaian textile firms. A longitudinal research method was employed with the aim of gaining an understanding of the development of the interrelationships between contexts, processes, actors and their activities and resources over a period of 13 years in order for the SME to internationalise. The findings show complex interrelationships, different roles and a greater importance of institutional actors than has been found in previous research. Furthermore, the findings show how the context of SMEs from emerging markets in Africa affect their internationalisation processes and success and how both home and foreign institutions and policies can contribute to the processes through a business network approach. Theoretically, this study contributes to theories of firm internationalisation from emerging markets. Practically, it provides implications for managers and policy makers about how to achieve and support the internationalisation of African SMEs.

Keywords: SME internationalisation; business network; emerging market; institutional actors; longitudinal research.

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Biographical notes: Irene Kujala obtained her Master of Science in International Business from the University of Vaasa in Finland and her PhD in International Marketing from the Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland. Her research interests focus on small and medium sized firm internationalisation, business network relationships, emerging African markets strategies, as well critical events in internationalisation and business network relationships. She previously taught at the Jyväskyllä University of Applied Science (Finland) and the Cyprus Institute of Marketing. Currently. She is an Assistant Professor/University Lecturer at the Äbo Akademi Faculty of Social Sciences, Business and Economics, Turku, Finland.

Richard Afriyie Owusu obtained a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and Philosophy from the University of Ghana, Legon. Thereafter, he obtained Bachelor's, Master's and PhD in Economics, Management and International Marketing from Hanken School of Economics, Finland. he has over 25 scientific publications spanning international market entry strategies; acquisitions and joint ventures; international project business; business networks; and business in Africa. He previously taught at Hanken School of Economics and the University of Vaasa in Finland. He has had further international experience in Australia and the USA. He has participated in several corporate projects such as Globalisation of Finnish SMEs; Brands, Innovation and Globalisation of Finnish Companies (BIG); and AVANS in Sweden. Currently, he is an Associate Professor at the School of Business and Economics, Linnaeus University, Sweden.

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1 Introduction and problem area

Emerging markets are countries that are implementing economic liberalisation and institutional changes and, thus, enjoying rapid economic growth. Over the past decades, these 'fast expanding markets' have successfully integrated into the world economy and attracted global capital through policies aimed at liberalising their economies (Acheampong and Dana, 2015). These changes have fundamentally altered their business environments and created diverse new market opportunities (Cavusgil et al., 2013). In particular, the internationalisation activities of emerging African market firms have increased over the past decade (Adeleye et al., 2016). Burgess and Steekamp (2006), Meyer and Peng (2016) and Sheth (2011) emphasise that emerging markets are fundamentally different from mature markets, making it important to study the development of their business environments, entrepreneurship and institutions.

A World Bank report (2019a, 2019b) has forecasted continuing growth in emerging sub-Saharan African countries in the coming years. Nevertheless, amidst the attractive business climate, the continent faces risks, international trade uncertainty and challenges associated with their national and international business environments.

Considering the current developments in emerging markets, researchers have noted that much less research has been done on African emerging markets (Boso et al., 2018; Dadzie and Owusu, 2015). Extant theories on the internationalisation of firms have primarily focused on firms from developed countries. Thus, these theories are not necessarily applicable to the context of emerging markets. This is due to the socioeconomic differences between developed and developing nations; hence, more research on emerging markets is required to improve international business theories (Burgess and Steekamp, 2006; Meyer and Peng, 2016; Sheth, 2011).

In a further review of the literature it was noted that most of the past studies on internationalisation of firms in emerging markets focused on multinational corporations (MNCs) (e.g., Klein et al., 2014). In addition, there is a particular focus on 'bigger emerging markets', such as Brazil, Russia, India and China, e.g., (Sandberg, 2014). To our knowledge, very few studies pertain specifically to small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) internationalisation from African emerging markets to highly developed market economies and even fewer deal with the textile industry (Ibeh, 2003).

In general, there has been a growing interest among academics in SME internationalisation research (see, e.g., Dana, 2017; Casado-Belmonte et al., 2020; Chetty and Holm, 2000; Paul et al., 2017; Steinhäuser et al., 2020). Similarly, research on emerging African market SMEs has increased on a broad range of topics (Dana, 2007; Amarteifio and Frimpong, 2019; Quaye and Mensah, 2019), however, studies of SME internationalisation are still rather limited (see, e.g., Hinson and Abor, 2005; Hinson et al., 2007; Ibeh et al., 2012; Kujala and Törnroos, 2018; Misati et al., 2017; Osei-Bonsu, 2014; Sibiya and Kele, 2019).

Two areas of research relevant to our study are the role of institutions and the nature and role of business relationships and networks. Scholars have emphasised that relationships with institutional actors, such as governments, are critical for conducting business (Hadjikhani and Ghauri, 2001; Korsakienė et al., 2015; Meyer and Peng, 2016). Consequently, they can either facilitate or restrict the internationalisation of SMEs. Further, in emerging markets, the ability of public institutions to influence issues, such as employment and export development, matters greatly (Dana, 2007; Sraha, 2015). As a result, many SMEs try to maintain connections with governments, as they are influential in providing resources and influencing the rules of economic development (Abor and Quartey, 2010). Thus, many SMEs in emerging markets grow with the support of government institutions and policies that liberalise their economies and promote economic development (Dana, 2007; Zahra et al., 2000).

While some institutional theory research (e.g., Meyer and Peng, 2016, 2005) brings to light varied responsibilities carried out by institutional bodies in emerging markets, the crux of the existing research has been about the impact institutions have when firms are internationalising from a developed economy to developing or emerging economies. A number of studies examined the possibility of emerging market SMEs to gain access to foreign markets and overcome the associated challenges by effectively utilising business relationships and networks (Acheampong et al., 2018; Ibeh and Kasem, 2011). However, past studies pertaining to small firms from African markets have not adequately taken into account the roles of institutional actors in building and maintaining business networks for SME's internationalisation. To our knowledge very few studies are specifically concerned with the role of institutions in SME internationalisation from African emerging markets to highly developed economies and even fewer deal with the textile industry (see Ibeh, 2003). Due to the resource and knowledge constraints of African firms (Amarteifio and Frimpong, 2019; Oduro, 2020), institutional differences and the strength and demands of formal institutions in highly developed markets (Jansson, 2020) entry barriers are much higher for firms originating from developing countries, especially SMEs (Kujala and Törnroos, 2018; Misati et al., 2017; Paul et al., 2017). Consequently, research on the internationalisation of SMEs from an emerging to a highly developed market economy is an evolving and important research area. Further empirical research is required to provide improved theoretical, managerial and policy-making implications.

Given the importance of internationalisation of SMEs and the role of institutions, this paper aims to develop an understanding of institutional actors and their roles in the internationalisation of SMEs from African markets by applying the business network perspective. The empirical focus of this research is a unique case study of a textile SME and its internationalisation process into the US market.

Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: What roles do institutional actors and their policies play and how do they interact with business actors in the internationalisation of SMEs in emerging African markets?

A qualitative, longitudinal case study approach is used to understand the complex and interrelated role of actors in the internationalisation process of the SME. The context of Ghanaian textile SMEs is significant, due to the industry's potential for accelerating economic growth and thus enhancing the country's potential as an emerging market (Adjasi, 2006). The longitudinal approach was selected to allow an analysis of the complex roles of the various actors and the internationalisation process of the company over a 13-year period; in addition to creating a deeper and holistic understanding that can provide the basis for the research, as the area of focus is relatively unexplored. Moreover, the events and actors in this case are unique in the African and emerging market context and the longitudinal approach is best suited to unearthing their interrelationships (Birkinshaw et al., 2011; Burgelman, 2011; Doz, 2011; Easton, 1995; Lamb et al., 2011). The results of this research contribute to the theories on SMEs internationalisation from emerging markets and set out practical recommendations for managers and policy makers alike. Such recommendations can assist in developing the competitiveness of SMEs from the African region.

This paper continues as follows: In Section 2 presents a literature review followed by Section 3 on the methodology and data collection. Section 4 analyses and discusses the results of the longitudinal case study as well as highlighting the major theoretical and practical implications. The study concludes with limitations and future research avenues in Section 5.

2 Literature review

2.1 The conceptualisation of SMEs

SMEs are defined differently by countries based on the number of staff and turnover. In the context of Ghana, the most commonly used definition in the extant literature classifies an SME as a firm having an employed workforce of between 6 and 99 workers (Afriyie et al., 2019; Easmon et al., 2019; Hinson and Sorensen, 2006; Oduro, 2019). The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MOTIPSI) provides an asset value of up to US $1million for SMEs (Afriyie et al., 2019). In classifying SMEs into three major types, the GSS (2015), however, uses slightly different figures. It classifies SMEs into three types, micro, SMEs. Micro enterprises have up to five workers; small enterprises have six to thirty workers and medium enterprises have 30–100 workers. The definition by the World Bank Regional Project on Enterprise Development (RPED) classifies SMEs into the same categories as the GSS (2015), i.e., micro, small and medium-sized firms. The micro firms are comprised of those enterprises that employ less than five individuals, small businesses consist of 6 to 29 workers and medium-sized are those with 30 to 99 employees (World Bank/RPED 2005; 20111). The classification adopted by the World Bank/REPD has been widely used and cited by previous researchers of SMEs in the Ghanaian and African contexts (e.g., Abor and Quartey, 2010). Additionally, this definition has helped in attaining consistency in SME research on Africa. Thus, we adopt the RPED definition for this study and stay in line with previous researchers.

SMEs are described as characterised by less resources and a more entrepreneurial leadership. Their size and characteristics enable them to be dynamic and malleable as the owners/managers are more personally involved and face less internal bureaucracy when implementing policies. This gives them both advantages and disadvantages compared to large companies in their national and international business. Their resource scarcity is a particular problem, but the entrepreneurs/managers might possess skills and relationships that characterise their business decisions and pathways and enable them to overcome their limitations (Dana et al., 2008; Berrou and Combarnous, 2012; Easmon et al., 2019; Paul et al., 2017).

The contributions of SMEs in developed and developing economies has been highlighted by previous research (González and Sorescu 2019). In Ghana, SMEs are estimated to contribute about 70% of the GDP and employ approximately 85% of the manufacturing workforce (Dana, 2007; Amarteifio and Frimpong, 2019, Appiah et al., 2019; Asare et al., 2019; Mamman et al., 2018).

Despite their importance, researchers posit that numerous hindrances impede SME growth in developing economies (González and Sorescu, 2019; Oduro, 2020). In Ghana in particular SMEs are faced with challenges that constrain their development, including inadequate access to finance, lack of experienced or competent management, infrastructure limitations, family and gender factors and issues with weak state institutions including corruption (Appiah et al., 2019; Asare et al., 2019; Hinson and Sorensen, 2006; Quagrainie, 2018, 2016). Given the limited resources of African SMEs, international expansion to developed economies is challenging (Paul et al., 2017; Misati et al., 2017). Therefore, considering the relevance of SMEs as key actors in the economic growth of many countries, studying the factors affecting their international growth and providing support for them is important (Sraha, 2015).

2.2 The business network approach

The business network approach (BNA) aims to provide an understanding of the development of relationships between firms, with particular focus on business-to-business markets and the complexity of the business network in which the firm operates. A business network is defined as a linkage of three or more relationships in a business context, creating an interdependence of direct and indirect links (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

These linkages are diverse and utilise diverse entities in the business market in order to collaborate on the different strengths of the parties. From the perspective of the need for firms to develop and manage interdependences in order to develop their operations, interactions become essential aspects of the BNA (Snehota, 2011).

The results of such interaction and exchange relationships provide a firm with competitive advantages, such as direct and indirect access to embedded resources of other actors in the network. As a result, businesses become beneficiaries of more resources than they can efficiently utilise or can pay for by themselves (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Further, such processes are critical for each firm's success or failure. In this vein, Dana et al. (2008) and Etemad et al. (2001) propose that internationalising SMEs should collaborate internationally in relationships and networks that they call 'symbiotic international business networks'.

Various frameworks have arisen from the BNA. In this paper, the focus is placed on the actors, resources and activities (ARA model) as well its internationalisation aspects (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

The ARA framework illustrates the substance and function of relationships. Within the relationship, activity links, resource ties and actors' bonds are developed. Within the relationship, activity links, resource ties and actors' bonds (ARA) are developed. The interplay among ARA is central to the development of relationships. Actors represent organisations, companies and their staff who perform business activities for the company or organisation. Thus, business entities, individuals, departments, suppliers, customers, distributors, competitors, government institutions, organisations, etc. are all actors in the business market. Activities occur when they exchange resources. Activities include technical, commercial and administrative activities that link the actors to each other.

Resources are assets that are used to perform activities or are exchanged with other actors, for example, physical (machinery, materials, etc.) and financial (financial resources, investments, etc.) resources.

Connections between firms play a major role towards efficiency in the resource management process (Dana et al., 2008; Etemad et al., 2001; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). The connections and exchanges through the ARA process extend further across international borders (Chetty and Holm, 2000).

While a network consists of independent actors, their interdependence and embeddedness sometimes require active network management, leadership, or facilitation (Agostini et al., 2015; Möller and Halinen, 2017). In addition, networks are sometimes built from scratch by network mobilisers that may be any one of the different types of network actors, i.e., firms, non-profit actors, or institutions (Owusu and Welch, 2007; Partanen and Möller, 2012; Ritvala and Salmi, 2011).

2.3 The role of institutions in networks and internationalisation

Among the actors in the business network are institutional or political actors. The network approach refers to the definition of institutions from institutional theory, paraphrasing the seminal works of North (1990, 2005), Scott (1995) and Williamson (2000) among others. Institutions are organised systems and structures of society. They consist of formal (official and legally recognised) and informal (existing structures and systems that inform and direct society but are not necessarily written or even legally recognised) (Jansson, 2020). From a business network perspective, institutions are 'non-business' or 'non-profit actors' as they represent the formal and informal aspects of society but primarily they are not established for profit. On the other hand, they are actors in the business market because they influence the strategies and performance of the market. They are decision makers and regulatory agencies that determine how business is done (Bengtson et al., 2009). They can also be purchasers (Owusu and Welch, 2007) and they can provide the enabling or disabling environment for businesses, local and foreign investments especially for SMEs (Hilmersson et al., 2015). Parastatal institutional actors, however, often have the aim to break-even, be self-financing or even make profits and, thus, may apply business principles in addition to their institutional or political role (Owusu and Welch, 2007).

In this study, we focus on the formal institutions that establish the business environment through legislation and supervision. These formal institutions are, e.g., the government departments, agencies and parastatals of emerging markets like Ghana [Owusu et al., (2021), pp.159–179]. Meyer and Peng (2016, 2005), Peng (2002) and Jansson (2020) emphasise that an important characteristic of emerging markets such as Ghana, is institutional change – where institutions are being reformed to improve the business environment. The pace and direction of change is, however, not clear to the business community as a moderate to high level of instability is common. This differentiates African institutional actors from those of developed markets, as those of developed markets are more predictable and stable (Sheth, 2011). In extreme situations, the institutions of Africa may be very weak [Hansen et al., 2015; Owusu et al., (2021), pp.159–179]) failing and even unsafe (Parente et al., 2019), thus requiring new or innovative strategies for the companies involved (Owusu and Habiyakare, 2011). Chen et al. (2018), posit that countries with good formal institutions influence positively the possibility and likelihood of internationalisation of their firms.

While institutions are important in creating the environment for business, they are the least studied of the network actors in the business network literature. A few studies have been done in the African context (Acheampong et al., 2018; Kuada and Sørensen, 2005; Kuada, 2016; Sraha, 2015), however several of these past studies have principally been on informal and personal networks. Thus, the impact of SME business network relations, particularly the role of institutions, needs further empirical research.

While the general role of institutions in networks has to some extent been studied, although less so in the African context as discussed above, the role of foreign institutions in the internationalisation of African SMEs has received very little attention in research. Research on this issue is lagging behind the 'facts on the ground' regarding the role of foreign institutions (bilateral and multilateral institutions) in African economic and business development (see Kuada, 2016; Kuada and Sørensen, 2005; [Owusu et al., (2021), pp.159–179]; Owusu and Welch, 2007). The very considerable support and involvement in business facilitation and networks, particularly for entrepreneurs and SMEs, by bilateral and multilateral institutions like the World Bank has been reported (https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr) but been the subject of very little academic research.

2.4 SME internationalisation from a business network perspective

Revising their original Uppsala model of internationalisation to include a business network model, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) emphasised that the relationship between firms and other actors offers the possibility of learning, trust building and commitment, and these factors are preconditions for successful internationalisation. Hence, particularly for internationalising SMEs, network relationships can allow them to gain knowledge related to the foreign markets as well as the necessary resources and capabilities required to succeed in foreign operations (Andersson et al., 2013; Bembom and Schwens, 2018; Dana et al., 2008; Galkina and Chetty, 2015; Lazarte, 2019).

For many SMEs, growth has been associated with involvement in international business networks and with other network actors guiding the choice of foreign market selection and entry. The risk and the uniqueness related to the choice of a foreign market can be a daunting challenge for SMEs. However, an embedded network of relationships can assist in reducing the level of risk and uncertainty associated with foreign market entry (Dana, 2017; Dana et al., 2008; Etemad et al., 2001; Kontinen and Ojala, 2011; Lazarte, 2019; Leppäaho et al., 2018; Musteen et al., 2010) and to develop the capabilities of the SME (Simba, 2013). Therefore, the positive role of network relationships on SME internationalisation is evident.

Conversely, network relationships can have a negative impact on SMEs' international growth. Coviello and Munro (1995) found that network relationships can constrain the quest for other opportunities. This is related to the complexity of business networks and reputational issues. Similarly, Ojala (2009) contends that a firm could lose sight of other potential opportunities and make a poor market selection when actively following its network into new markets. Engaging in global networks could create challenges, such as difficulties related to cultural adaptations that can inhibit the development of relationships in the network (Vahlne et al., 2010).

SME decision makers need to consider the significance of network relationships and ties and devote time and financial resources in building relationships with relevant actors in the best possible way to achieve mutual benefits (Bembom and Schwens, 2018; Covin and Miller, 2014; Leppäaho et al., 2018).

2.5 SME internationalisation and network studies in emerging markets

Previous research has shown that network establishment, both domestic and foreign, has been a useful means of business expansion for SMEs from emerging markets during all stages of their process (Ciravegna et al., 2014; Ibeh and Kasem, 2011; Kuada, 2016; Kuada and Sørensen, 2000; Senik et al., 2011).

However, the research covers many countries and issues; it is limited and should be expanded (Kuada and Sørensen, 2000; Senik et al., 2011); the research on the role of institutional actors being particularly limited. Research on firm internationalisation in the African context has been growing in the past two decades (see Acheampong et al., 2018; Ayakwah et al., 2019; Boso et al., 2018; 2016; Sraha, 2015). In a review of internationalisation literature on African firms during the period 1995 and 2011, Ibeh et al. (2012) and also Ayakwah et al. (2019) observe that most past internationalisation research on African firms has been focused on other areas and industries such as agriculture and on export barriers in various industries (e.g., Appiah et al., 2019; Henson et al., 2011; Okpara and Kabongo, 2010), but not on the role of networks and relationships. Other studies have mainly focused on industries such as ICT (see, e.g., Hinson and Abor, 2005; Hinson and Sorensen, 2006) and only a very small number of studies have included industries such as textiles and garments.

Furthermore, Kuada and Sørensen (2005) and Kuada (2016) propose that collaborations with foreign partners and institutions such as governments are needed to enable effective upstream and downstream internationalisation of SMEs from developing economy markets. Such network linkages can provide developing economy firms with the necessary technological, managerial and financial resources. Conducting network related activities involving firms in advanced and developing economy markets is considered a crucial initial step for successful entry of especially developing market firms (Ayakwah et al., 2019).

The study by Kujala and Törnroos (2018) revealed the challenges that an SME from African economies, such as Ghana, battle with when operating in an unpredictable domestic business context. Further findings revealed that because the SME manager of the studied firm was competent and experienced, based on many years of locally running the parent company in the same business, the SME succeeded in working successfully in an unstable business environment within a chaotic state infrastructure. Sraha (2015) and Akomea et al. (2014) focused on the role of local institutions in supporting the internationalisation of SMEs. They suggest the need for African governments and institutions to establish policies and provide more incentives, such as tax breaks and lower utility costs, to allow for a greater expansion of export activities, (see Akomea et al., 2014; Appiah et al., 2019; Sraha, 2015). Furthermore, factors such as commitment, innovative products and taking advantage of network relationships, help to reduce the export challenges of the firms (Kujala and Törnroos, 2018).

Research on firms' export activities and behaviour in Tanzania (e.g., Milanzi, 2012) reveals that inadequate internationalisation information, knowledge and financial restrictions were the major impediments to exporting. However, by taking advantage of network relationships, they encountered less difficulties around exporting. Ties between institutions and strong business networks were identified as being key factors as regards influencing exports and the ability of the firm to access external markets.

Network relationships have further been shown to facilitate internationalisation in the textile industry. For instance, a study conducted by Visser (1996) on textile exports in Peru, found that family ties and personal network relationships were the key factors to internationalisation success. Along the same lines, Ibeh (2003) studied Nigerian fashion export companies at the entrepreneurial orientation level. The study revealed that fashion companies that were successful in the US market were the result of building relationships with actors, such as intermediaries and agents. In addition, the study by Ciravegna et al. (2014) on the empirical analysis of internationalisation of textile manufacturers in China explored the view of internationalisation as being influenced by networks.

Other studies on textile internationalisation, (see, e.g., Chan et al., 2008; Dhiman and Sharma, 2016; Tandon and Reddy, 2013; Yoganandan and Jaganathan, 2013); confirm the rapid growth, exporting efficiency and ability to capture foreign markets demonstrated by firms in emerging economies such as China, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. These studies confirm the importance of effective collaboration and institutional support. Future studies in these areas are to be recommended with the research concentrating on better strategies to aid and develop textile and apparel internationalisation and export from emerging economies. Thus, studies on the crucial role of the textile industry on emerging economies in terms of improving the nation's economy and exports should not be ignored.

It is interesting to note that while the textile industry is one of the most significant and internationalised industries in many emerging markets, this is not so for African markets. Such an industrial context has been recognised as the primary take-off industry for many emerging economies, mainly as a result of a rapid expansion in the labour market (Dhiman and Sharma, 2016). Clothing and textile SMEs provide an opportunity for academic research and for individual businesses to learn and create relationships with the relevant stakeholders (Guercini and Runfola, 2010).

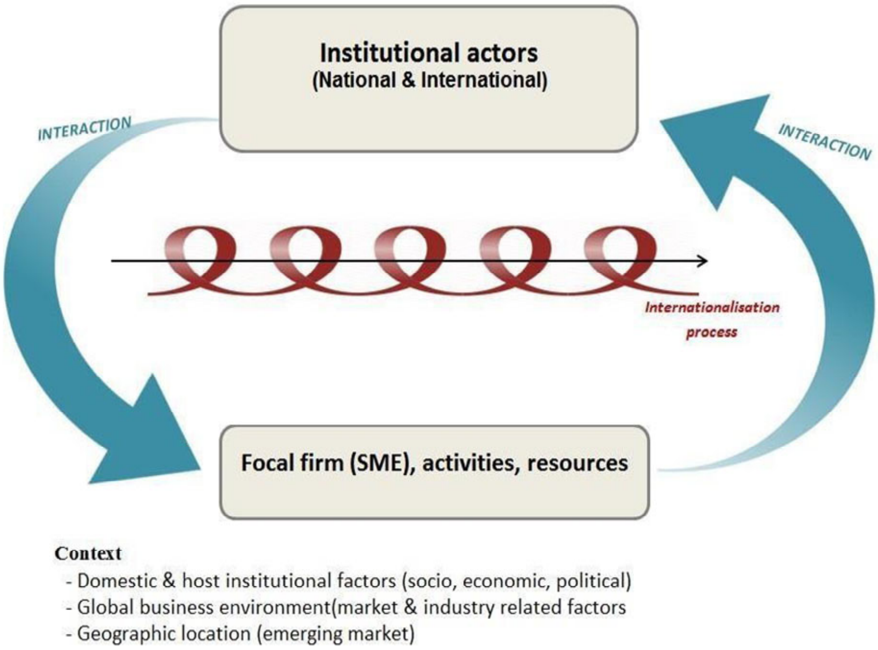
However, most of the previous research has been based on other markets and very few on emerging Africa economies.

The massive internationalisation success of Asian textile companies (China, Bangladesh and India, etc.) stands in sharp contrast to that of sub-Saharan African countries. Thus, the considerable knowledge gap in relation to textile and garment internationalisation exhibited by African SMEs necessitates further research, even though previous research has provided theoretical frameworks on which to build. Furthermore, while the relevance of the aforementioned studies cannot be ignored, researchers on business in Africa (e.g., Adeleye et al., 2015; Boso et al., 2018; Fukunishi, 2009; Hinson and Abor, 2005; Ibeh et al., 2012; Kuada, 2016; Kropp et al., 2006), have frequently recommended broadening the scope and context of research in emerging African markets.

2.6 Conceptual framework

Based on the above-mentioned literature review, we developed a conceptual model for this study (Figure 1).

Figure 1 A conceptual model of the role of institutional actors and policies in emerging market SME internationalisation (see online version for colours)



The literature highlights the role of network relationships through the lens of interrelationships among actors, activities and resources. Therefore, this study analyses internationalisation from an emerging economy by considering SME relationships with relevant actors, their activities and the resources exchanged.

In addition, national and foreign political/institutional actors influence the internationalisation process in various ways. As per the literature review, the roles of the various actors can benefit or impede the success of internationalisation of the SME. Thus, the activities of both domestic and foreign network actors, particularly institutional actors and their policies, may affect the emerging market SME's possibility of entering foreign markets.

The reviewed literature further addresses the role of business environmental factors in national and global contexts. It discusses how factors from the external environment relate to/affect businesses in both the home country and the foreign/host market. Thus, it is assumed that contextual factors in the local and foreign business environment in which the SME firm operates may affect its success.

Particularly, the characteristics of emerging markets may play an increased role in influencing actors' relationships and internationalisation development. Changes in policies by institutions, such as government, cultural, political and economic instabilities can be critical in emerging markets.

The barriers described above have an impact on the effectiveness of key economic drivers for SMEs in emerging markets, creating challenges to market entry into developed markets as well as challenges for the SMEs competitiveness internationally. Networks can be an external source for emerging market SMEs to gain and acquire foreign market competence. The context of institutional actors as part of the firm's network is hence conceptualised as providing the internationalising SME with valuable resources, which in turn, help the firms to identify opportunities, obtain information and assess risks. Therefore, it is important for SMEs to cultivate network relationships with institutional actors to gain access to the goodwill of governmental actors and their resources.

Nevertheless, contributing activities and internal resources of the SME firms such as, e.g., firm characteristics, competencies, resources, management and personnel also affect internationalisation success.

3 Methodology and data

The study focuses on an SME that internationalised from an emerging African market to an advanced market utilising an in-depth qualitative, case approach (Yin, 2016, 2018) and a longitudinal research method.

The qualitative method enables researchers to establish closeness to the actors and processes being studied, analyse business relationships and the relevance of complex business contexts and delve deeper when searching for answers to research questions that are rooted in processes and changes over time (Birkinshaw et al., 2011; Doz, 2011; Easton, 1995; Welch et al., 2011). Many researchers propose qualitative and inductive methods as being very suitable for research on international SMEs and international entrepreneurship (Abebrese, 2014; Dana, 2017; Dana and Dumez, 2015). Others advocate the qualitative research approach when studying emerging markets, due to the potential for gaining an in-depth understanding of their specific contexts and processes, as they are assumed to be different from those in which the established theories were developed (Burgess and Steenkamp., 2006; Meyer and Peng, 2016; Sheth, 2011).

Regarding the case study methodology, past research posits that for studies related to analysing and understanding network relationships, as in the case of the relationships and roles of institutional actors, case studies and qualitative research are considered relevant (Abebrese, 2014; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005). Consequently, case study methodology has been the dominant approach used in industrial marketing research (e.g., Piekkari et al., 2010; Poulis et al., 2013). In addition, Yin (2018) further advocates that the case study method is suitable for gaining an understanding of the 'how's' and 'whys' of a phenomenon as we aim to understand/grasp this study/ as is our intention in this study.

The general criteria used in this case selection were:

a SMEs in the textile manufacturing sector

b internationalisation activities since 2000

c SMEs with international business supported by institutional actors in relation to the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).

The initial list of firms was collected from several Ghanaian institutions including the Ghana Export Promotion Authority, as well as the West African Trade Hub (USAID-WATH), an American government internationalisation support agency headquartered in Ghana.

The selection of a single case was underlined by several factors taking into account the research aim, the research gap and the research context. Firstly, due to the need to define boundaries for the study, the current case fulfilled the selection criteria and the boundaries set for the study. Second, in order to fulfil the research aim and goals, a deliberate decision was made to focus on this particular single case as it is unique and fits the theoretical and purposeful sampling requirements (Yin, 2016, 2018).

In this sense, the single case is justified due to its 'revelatory' and longitudinal nature (Easton, 1995; Yin, 2016, 2018). Thus, it allows for a detailed analysis of the development process of the case firm to be made and an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon to be obtained. Further the research gap and limited research in this area concerning the emerging African market context, makes the deeper analysis of this single case relevant to the development of a contextual understanding that can provide the bases for further research. (Yin, 2016, 2018).

3.1 Data collection and longitudinal procedure

Relevant qualitative data were obtained through a longitudinal study while ensuring that trust and closeness were established with key informants in the case study company and other institutional actors. The longitudinal research process involved several rounds of interviews as well as a retrospective reconstruction of events and follow-up analysis, covering the period from 2000–2013. Due to the retrospective and longitudinal perspective required when studying a dynamic internationalisation process, special attention needs to be given to the research design.

In the current study, we analysed how the case firm internationalisation started and evolved and the influencing factors related to the context and the actors' roles. This is in line with longitudinal qualitative methodology studies (e.g., Birkinshaw et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2011), which provide an understanding of how the internationalisation of the case SME unfolds over time in its context.

We followed the interview checklist recommended by Kvale (1996) when undertaking the qualitative interviews; we conducted three telephone interviews followed by eight semi-structured in person interviews and three feedback and follow-up sessions. These interviews and follow-up meetings were necessary to ensure a valid and reliable understanding of the changing situation in context, enable us to discover the conclusion of events from the previous meetings and to obtain confirmation from the interviewees. The interviews rounds took place in 2002, 2011 and 2013 with representatives of the SME as well as the institutional actors, in order to map the internationalisation process of the firm and analyse the role played by the institutional network actors.

The interviewees in the company were the owner and president of the company and the export manager. In addition, informants from the USAID-WATH, the president's special initiative for garment and apparel exports in the Ministry of Foreign Trade) (MOTIPSI, Ghana), were interviewed. They provided supplementary data and gave us additional sources and links to secondary data. While the studied SME was the focal actor that was internationalising, our study also focuses on the roles of the institutional actors in the network of the SME during its internationalisation process. Therefore, the institutional actors' own narration and experiences of the process as well as their secondary data were crucial information for our analyses. Interviewing and collecting data from the institutional actors was thus required to achieve validity and reliability for the study (Gray, 2014; Henn et al., 2009). Our methodology is similar to that proposed by Abebrese (2014) in his study of the relationship between national institutions and entrepreneurship in Ghana.

Due to the high level of importance attached to the programme by both sides, many written reports were published in documents and online by the institutional actors. Thus, we were able to achieve triangulation of primary and secondary data to raise the reliability of our analyses (see Henn et al., 2009).

In summary, interviewees' responsibilities in the firm and their position and impact during the internationalisation development were taken into account when choosing the participants. Each phase of interviewing offered a varied view, depicted the studied phenomena clearly and added to an understanding of the case SME's internationalisation process.

3.2 The country context: Ghana

After a varied economic and industrial development since independence from British colonial rule in 1957 (Dadzie, 2013; Kapur et al., 1991; Ocquaye, 1980), Ghana, at the turn of the 21st century was consolidating its democratic tradition (Ayee, 2002). However, the industrial base of the country was inadequate and the new government, similar to the previous one, wanted to implement policies to boost economic growth. Since independence, the fast growth of the population (6.5 million in 1960 that had tripled to 18.5 million in 2000) has outstripped economic growth. Thus, one of the main areas of economic policy was to industrialise and create job opportunities for the expanding population. The textile industry that exemplified the recent decline in the country's industries, was selected as a potential growth industry that could benefit from the large labour force, low wages and its reputation as a take-off industry for developing countries (Amankwah-Amoah, 2015; Breisinger et al., 2011; MOTI, 2014; Quartey, 2006). The Government of Ghana (GoG) established policies to support the sector as part of the 'presidents special initiative' (http://trade.gov/agoa).

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The policies of the GoG followed the policies of the Government of the USA to support the economic growth of African countries through the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) that was signed in 2000 (USITA, 2014). The AGOA opened the USA market to the tariff and quota free exports of many products including textiles from African countries including Ghana. As a result of both governments' policies, institutional, financial, managerial and training support was given to firms in the textile industry by government institutions in Ghana and the USA.

3.3 Findings

The presentation and analysis of this data focus on the period within which SGEL internationalised and expanded to the USA (from 2002 until the last data collection in 2013). However, to gain a deeper insight into the process, the analysis also retrospectively takes into account the activities that took place prior to the entry into the US market (1980 through 2001). It is also necessary to examine this period in order to gain an understanding of the initial background and the preceding actors and activities before entry into the US market.

3.4 Establishment and growth of SGEL

Sleek Garment and Textile Limited (SGEL) was the case company used in this study. It is a Ghanaian SME that designs and manufactures textiles. As a family business, SGEL was established as a subsidiary of the parent company, Sleek Fashion that was established in 1980 to initially offer its products to the Ghanaian market. Later, the company began to export products to South Africa and Nigeria. According to the interviewees, one of the visions of the firm from the onset was to penetrate developed economies, such as the US market.

The company aimed

> "to become a world-class manufacturer of garments, producing high-quality garments at competitive prices using a skilled workforce and superior raw materials while complying with corporate social responsibility standards" (http://www.sleekgarment.com; Interviewer Owner Manager, 2011, 2013).

Furthermore, "the company is committed to penetrate highly developed market countries and ensure that clients' needs are met successfully" (Interview, Owner Manager; Export Manager, 2011; 2013).

Respondents also expressed SGEL's high ambitions: "Our dream is to expand and see more brands coming out of SGEL, I believe everything is possible in this industry" (Interview, Owner Manager, 2013).

However, the internationalisation of SGEL into developed economies did not occur until 2002 due to various challenges that the interviewees attribute to the national business environment. For instance, prior to the firm's internationalisation, the economy of Ghana experienced a persistent decline, thus minimising the number of its potential consumers. Cheap imports from other textile manufacturers provided robust *competition for the company's products. Ghana was less advanced in terms of* technology, infrastructure and human resources of the industry than the major Asian textile exporters.

Moreover, "the cost of doing business was relatively high. For instance, lending institutions were reluctant to provide credit to SMEs and if they did, it came with very high interest rates" (Interview, Manager Director; Export Manager, 2011, 2013).

> "Well, with a lot Chinese competitors providing cheap textile and imitations to customers, this is challenging for us and other small firms. There is lack of financial resources to support some small companies This makes us worry about the business environment as it can be very challenging and the prospects are a bit blurred as a result" (Interview: Owner Manager, 2013).

The export manager expressed her concern regarding the competition as follows:

> "Of course, the issue of competition put a lot of pressure on us. There is tough competition and then we have customers like Walmart and Roytess who are very well informed. They expect first world standard in terms of products and deadlines and in some way our customers are big names. I think that puts one under pressure to perform to the first world standard" (Interview, Export Manager, 2013).

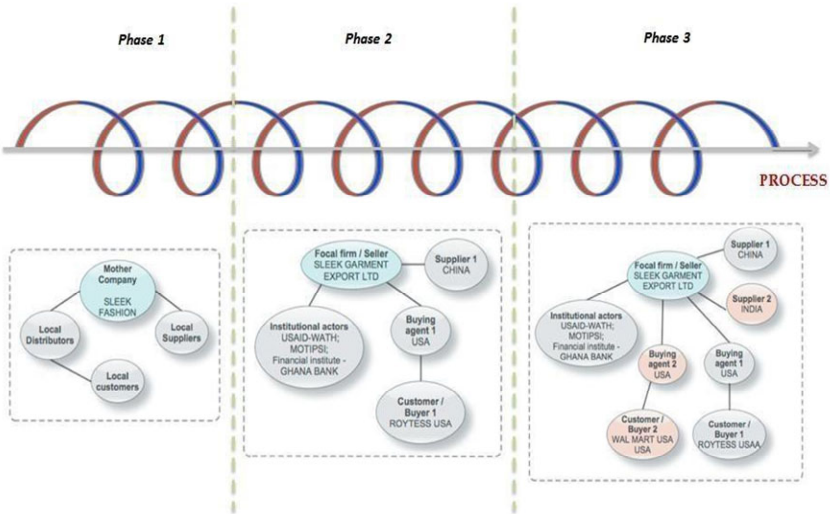
In the mid-1990s, economic and institutional reforms took place in the Ghanaian government and various positive changes were implemented. This created a more favourable environment for both domestic and foreign investments. After the country achieved a successful democratic election, it began to build a reputation as a progressive nation. Consequently, the perception of a stable democracy influenced many developed Western countries to cooperate with Ghana on matters of economic development and promotion of entrepreneurship. As a result, the Ghanaian economy experienced steady growth, thus providing opportunities for SGEL.

3.5 Internationalisation of SGEL: actors, activities and resources

For clarity and simplicity in the analysis, the network evolution, the roles of institutional actors and the internationalisation development process have been divided into three periods, denoted by phase 1, phase 2 and phase 3 (P1, P2 and P3).

As seen in Figure 2, during phase 1 (P1) (1980 through 2001), the parent company, sleek fashion, was established to serve the local market and other neighbouring African countries. The main actors during this period were Sleek Fashion and its relationships with local actors (local distributors, suppliers and customers). Internationalisation activities were only focused on exporting to neighbouring countries.

Figure 2 Summary of the phases in the internationalisation and network development (see online version for colours)



P1 played a critical role in enhancing the company's development of its vision, as well as its management capabilities, including the experience and knowledge needed to expand onto an international market. Although the parent company had envisioned an expanded market at this time, economic and political challenges during P1 made it difficult to proceed with the process. However, in 2000 the election of a new government and the changing business environment gave hope to SMEs in Ghana including SGEL.

Phase 2 (P2) took place from 2002–2003. This period was initiated by the founding of SGEL in 2002. SGEL was established to take advantage of the benefits provided by the AGOA. The AGOA was passed by the US Government in 2000 and aimed at removing barriers to African products entering the US market. Ghana was hence declared eligible for apparel and textile provisions under the AGOA.

During this period, the new Ghanaian government that took power in 2000 continued to improve the business environment and invested in improving the textile industry. The negotiations, partnerships and interactions that followed helped to solidify positive relations between SGEL and numerous governmental and non-governmental institutions in Ghana and the US. Thus, the US and Ghanaian governments embraced policies and companies that would identify and exploit the emerging business opportunities. This cooperation created a favourable environment for SGEL with a focus on serving developed market economies and expanding positive relations with other institutions from the USA and Ghana. *The GOG established the president's special initiative within the* MOTIPSI to supervise the AGOA project and to support SMEs and their entry into foreign markets.

The informant from the MOTIPSI stated that

> "The first motive we had when we connected with SGEL was that this is a firm that wants to internationalise to an advanced economy and expand. We knew that the US has a high potential and more politically and economically stable. Gaining support from AGOA and WATH, was a very good indication for economic growth and potential for SGEL. We were in no doubt and were willing and happy to support and be part of developing SGEL internationalisation. If SGEL wins, Ghana wins" (Interview, PSI, informant 2011).

To support Ghana in reaping the benefits of the AGOA, the US government provided SGEL access and collaboration under USAID-WATH. Further, the countries worked together to help Ghanaian SMES to benefit from AGOA policies. The MOTIPSI support for SGEL also encouraged local actors, such as financial institutions, to provide financing that would enable SGEL to set up a textile factory in Accra equipped with advanced technology to aid its internationalisation vision (Interview, Manager Director; Export Manager, 2011; 2013). This enabled SGEL to become Ghana's leading brand as a modern textile and garment manufacturer. In particular, the USAID-WATH arranged workshops and education regarding the US market and provided access to trained industry professionals to assist SGEL

Initially, respondents admitted that they had the perception that the US would be a difficult place to conduct business and this also caused anxiety about the process and considerable doubts that they would be able to survive in such a market.

> "Due to the size of the US market, it was very difficult for a firm coming from Africa like us to enter such a big market and to be acknowledged as a reliable textile supplier, however, connections with MOTSPI and WATH and relying on information from these actors helped to reduce these uncertainties as internationalisation progressed " (Interview, Owner Manager, 2011).

The USAID–WATH provided agents from US markets and opportunities to attend trade shows in the US. This assisted with initiating the internationalisation process into the US market. For instance, as a result of attending the trade shows, SGEL gained contact with a buying agent for Roytess, a US garment and textile company, leading to its first order in the US. This occurrence was evident in the following quote by the USAID informant: "Our team got the chance to train SGEL about the American market that prepared them for international activities" (Interview, informant USAID, 2011).

According to SGEL's interviewees, "during this period, the support received from local and foreign actors" (MOTIPSI, USAID/WATH) also made the establishment of contacts with Chinese suppliers possible, from whom they could purchase raw materials. The company hired trained staff and expatriates from abroad to assist with the manufacturing processes, thus assuring the quality of its products going to the US market.

"The training and support of USAID/WATH helped us achieve success in the US market and hence we will continue to be committed to maintaining a good relationship and work along with them" (Interview, Owner Manager, 2011).

SGEL's network and actors expanded during phase 3 (P3). The relationships between SGEL and the American and Ghanaian institutions and business network were strongly maintained. This resulted in additional contacts with a new buying agent for Walmart in the US. This occurred during a beauty show in 2004 sponsored by USAID-WATH, where the orders to supply garments for Walmart were made. Contacts were also developed with an Indian supplier for raw materials, securing the efficiency and effectiveness of the internationalisation.

According to the Export Manager:

> "More trust was developed as we got the chance to clarify what we do and the benefits received from AGOA. We worked so hard and proved to buyers that we can be trusted. However, the long-term contract from both buyers at the same time was also as a result of the support from USAID/WATH." (Interview, Export Manager, 2011)

According to the interviewees,

> "During this period, continuous workshops were offered and relationships with the institutional actors were significant. Establishing relations with the relevant senior officials and decision-makers in Ghana was time-consuming and required the right relationship building approach, as the policy was new and the bureaucracy of Ghanaian public institutions was slow. However, with time, the company managed to develop relationships with the relevant officials in the newly established institutions that were intended to provide support. Finally, SGEL gained important connections that were critical for the company's successful internationalisation." (Owner Manager 2011, 2013)

Nevertheless, during this period, challenges related to the business environment of both the Ghanaian and US markets affected SGEL's internationalisation development. For instance, the US financial recession in 2007–2008 led to instability in the US market, thus leading to lower levels of imports and a reduction in orders from both major US buyers, Walmart and Roytess.

According to the interviewees,

> "The election of a new government in Ghana in 2009 created uncertainty for the company. The period from the beginning of the election campaign to the end of the newly elected government's four-year term (2008–2013) led to a deterioration in the political, economic and business environment in Ghana.

> New government policies led to higher production costs for SMEs in Ghana, including SGEL. Additionally, the new government altered and reduced some of the conditions and support provided by MOTIPSI, such as workshops, education, financial and technical support. This weakened SGEL's relationship with the institutional actors, leaving the company with less access to resources, which ultimately affected sales and orders from international buyers. For example, the US buyers were reluctant to place large orders because of their perceived uncertainty in the Ghanaian business environment and changes implemented by the new government. Access to new American buyers was difficult because of the political and economic uncertainty in Ghana." (Interview, Manager Director; Export Manager, 2011, 2013).

According to informants from MOTIPSI and USAID:

> "Over the years all of us including SGEL had to learn how to "adjust and adapt" to socio-political changes in Ghana. Uncertainty and changes in Government and economic policies can put a strain on the growth of companies like SGEL." (Interview, MOTIPSI, informant, 2011)

> "Though we have been lucky to have in general AGOA policies working positively in our favour, the challenging and unstable Ghanaian political environment can scare foreign companies from cooperating with Ghanaian SMEs and such instability also put pressure on us as a team, hence affecting from time to time our relationship with SGEL, during their entry to US". (Interview, MOTIPSI informant, 2013).

For her part, the USAID informant stated that:

> "In Africa and particularly with our experience working in Ghana and our interaction with SGEL and MOTPSI, the Ghanaian socio-political environment can either create a positive or negative effect on expansion of businesses to foreign countries. At a certain time during this process, we noticed that there were challenges from our side to get new buying agents to cooperate with SGEL as a result of the political uncertainty in Ghana." (Interview, USAID informant, 2013)

Nevertheless, the core motives of the AGOA remained unchanged for both the American and the Ghanaian institutions. Ghana's high ratings and particularly those of SGEL, in the AGOA's performance, caused the US government to expand their support of the AGOA in both 2004 and 2011; this further supported the entry of Ghanaian firms into the US market (http://www.agoa.org).

MOTPSI informants stated that:

> "Reflecting on Sleek internationalisation, where they started and where they are now, we are very proud and we do not regret to have supported their process irrespective of challenges faced. Sleek fashion' decision and timing to enter the USA market was just perfect. Also, AGOA and MOTPSI policies were introduced at the right time to fit perfectly and help Sleek get an opportunity to enter an international market that is well developed." (Interview, informant, MOTPSI; Ghana, 2013)

Asked to summarise the firm's internationalisation development, the respondent added that:

> "I have to say we are grateful to AGOA, MOTPSI and USAID-WATH who have helped us to internationalise. These people made decisions, provided support, training and activities, which involved time constraints. Well, we have also worked hard even before SGEL was set up. In fact what happened with

> introduction of AGOA, MOTPSI and USAID-WATH has greatly influenced where we are now." (Interview, Owner Manager, 2013)

Based on the success gained through the support of the AGOA, SGEL planned to enter other developed markets, targeting the UK as its next foreign market. The company was determined to experience steady expansion and to introduce more quality brands into its future product line.

4 Discussion, contributions and implications

4.1 The context and the internationalisation process of SMEs from emerging African markets

Our study shows that there are three aspects regarding the Ghanaian context as an African emerging market that differentiate it from other contexts where the results of the extant research are based (see, e.g., Hadjikhani and Ghauri, 2001; Hilmersson et al., 2015; Sandberg, 2014). The key factors in the domestic institutional context included the political system, the policies of the reigning political party and the institutions tasked with the responsibility of enforcing them. Despite support by national institutional actors towards the case company during much of the period studied, the unstable national environment and changes made by a newly elected government created many challenges for the long- term planning and competitiveness of the SME. While policy changes are not limited to small emerging markets like Ghana, its less developed economy exacerbated the effects on SMEs. In short, contrary to the claims of the extant theory, the obstacles created by domestic institutional and contextual factors did not provide an easy home market for the entrepreneurial SME (SGEL); a trouble-free home market would, as is the case for home markets in developed countries, have given the firm a base from which to develop strategical preparations for unexpected trends in the external market.

The case under study demonstrates that the significance of external institutional factors is enhanced when their support is required to help SMEs enter a competitive developed country market. The case firm was mostly dependent on the developments in foreign institutions to facilitate its internationalisation. SGEL was predisposed to fluctuations in the external business environment due to its lack of competitiveness internationally and its heavy reliance on trade preferences allowed under the AGOA agreement. This situation, which faces many other African enterprises, prompted the US government to implement protectionist measures under the existing or expanded AGOA. These preferences were intended to benefit African firms and help them survive the open market competition from more developed emerging market firms. Once the preferences were in place, the company was guaranteed better conditions because they removed the possibility of international trade rules coercing the US into reviewing or removing them. In other words, in contrast to the normal free trade practices of the US over the decades, these specific policies were agreed by lawmakers and subsequent presidents to help African textile firms to establish international competitiveness.

Prior studies stress the role played by the external environment of advanced economy markets during the internationalisation of a firm. They outline that the difficulties that companies from developed market economies strategically experience are the challenges of gaining knowledge and a continuous understanding of the development and management of the international business environment in which the firm operates

(Fletcher and Barrett, 2001; Hadjikhani and Ghauri, 2001; Hilmersson et al., 2015; Jansson, 2020). In addition, previous studies have found that SMEs from advanced market economies possess the internal abilities to navigate and handle the challenges mentioned above and in many cases use their own business networks to overcome these challenges. Thus, prior studies posit that SMEs from developed market economies are not necessarily reliant on institutional network linkages in their domestic market for successful internationalisation (Chetty and Holm, 2000; Hilmersson et al., 2015; Ritvala and Salmi, 2011; Sandberg, 2014).

Consequently, the reliance of the Ghanaian SME on institutions and the extent to which it is affected by the business environment, as found in this study, is not in line with the existing studies on developed market economy firms. Ghana experienced fairly good growth in most of its economic sectors over the period of the study. However, despite this growth, the competitiveness of the company was impeded by domestic market problems such as the underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of relevant skilled staff and economic instability. The results imply that entrepreneurs operating within emerging African economies like Ghana find the internal challenges to be of an almost similar magnitude to those when competing in external markets.

4.2 Institutional actors

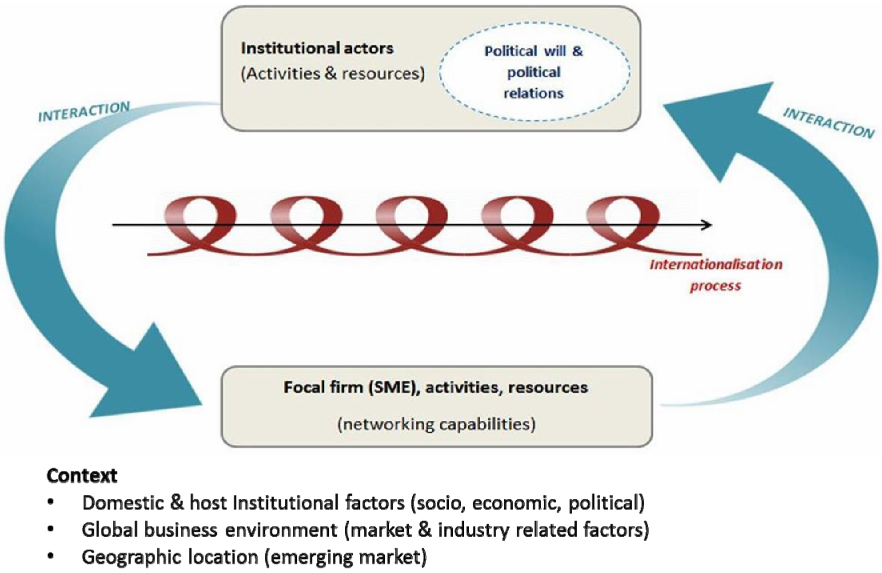
With regards to the internationalisation development of the studied case firm, the activities and resources provided by the institutional actors were more significant than has been implied in previous studies using the network internationalisation approach. Extant studies on business networks generally portray institutional actors as playing a passive role or as enablers of business networks through policies targeting the business environment or as purchasers of infrastructure projects or supplies; thus they are not usually seen as active initiators and active mobilisers of business or internationalisation processes over many years (Hadjikhani and Ghauri, 2001; Hadjikhani and Thilenius, 2005; Ritvala and Salmi, 2011; Owusu and Welch, 2007).

However, the emerging African context case that we have studied shows the significant impact of institutional actors and their capability to initiate, facilitate, consult, train and solve complex problems for successful SME internationalisation. Furthermore, institutional actors have an important impact on emerging economies, due to the fact that the global context affects emerging markets and this necessitates a high degree of coordination among national and multilateral institutions to ensure that global trade regulations are met. International bilateral and multilateral institutions have also provided financial, technical and managerial support to African countries (Kuada, 2016; Kuada and Sørensen, 2005; World Bank, 2019a, 2019b). The study's findings reveal that the choices made by institutional actors in advanced market economies to ensure market entry for the emerging African SMEs and help improve their economic growth, were due to an aggregation of political forces, thus resulting in a positive and a strong 'political will' (Kujala, 2016). The benefits from the AGOA were offered at various stages to specific African countries. These were based on certain economic, social and political indicators perceived by US institutions. The perceptions created a level of 'political relations' between the US and the African countries.

The implications of the study emphasise the roles of local institutional actors as the bases of the policy, support and enabling environment for the internationalisation of SMEs. The local institutional actors must create a stable and enabling business environment as well as the required support for the SMEs to enable the entrepreneurs and SMEs to develop and implement their internationalisation plans. The study shows that the stability of the business environment is essential for obtaining the collaboration and support of foreign institutions. Thus, the case also exemplifies the improvements in institutional activities towards the internationalisation of firms in sectors where governments have established support and supervisory institutions for SMEs and their export development. Two examples in the case of Ghana are the MOTIPSI and the closely related Ghana Export Promotion Authority, whose mandate and resources to support internationalisation of Ghanaian firms has been strengthened over the last decade.

This suggests the need for a revised conceptual framework illustrating the significance and impact of institutional actors both in emerging economies and developed market economies. Based on the study's findings, Figure 3 provides a modified model depicting a new perspective in understanding institutional actors and their roles in the internationalisation process of SMEs in the context of emerging African economies.

Figure 3 A model of institutional actors' roles in SME internationalisation from an emerging market context (see online version for colours)



Thus, the current study proposes new constructs regarding the impact and implication of the activities and resources of institutional actors during internationalisation development of SMEs from Africa. In Figure 3, the actors, activities and resources of the network, the regulatory and sometimes supportive context of local and foreign institutional actors, as conceptualised in Figure 1, are confirmed to be in line with previous literature. However, we our study implies two main constructs related to the activities and resources of institutional actors: 'political will' and 'political relations' (see Kujala, 2016). Political will is the combined activities and resources of institutional actors to actively enable and participate in business networks. It enables them to go beyond being merely passive enabling actors or purchasers and become active in initiating, facilitating, providing consultancy services, training and solving problems in order to ensure the positive internationalisation of firms from emerging markets. In addition, ‘political relations’, refers to the intentions behind why institutional actors in developed markets use their resources to provide preferential treatment for some emerging market firms to gain better access to their markets and to actively provide the necessary support and advantages. The preferential treatment granted, in this case, to the African textile industry through the AGOA can be considered ‘one-sided’ in its potential benefit to African economies as it is not a ‘typical trade agreement’ like those that are signed to provide equal access to the signatories, such as the European Union and Canada (CETA) trade agreement (Śliwińska, 2018). Thus, we propose that the constructs ‘political will’ and ‘political relations’ encapsulate the bases for these agreements. They are, thus, in particular useful constructs to bring into the study of the role of institutional actors for internationalisation of emerging market SMEs.

The implications for SMEs from emerging markets are that they should expand their networking strategies to take cognisance of the importance of both local and foreign institutional actors, as well as their activities and resources. While there is very little direct research on business relationship building and networking in African national markets, Berrou and Combarnous (2012), Fafchamps and Minten (2001) and Jansson (2020) have confirmed the native relationship-building culture of such markets; thus managers need to take this culture onto the international level. They should realise that the widespread internal market instability that disables their planning can be mitigated with the active support of both local and foreign institutions. Therefore, their activities of relationship building, capacity building and business development should factor in the local and foreign institutions. Moreover, with the hard competition from other emerging market companies, they should spare no time or effort in continuing to develop their competencies through networking and strategic alliances.

Policymakers in poorer emerging markets and foreign institutions that support them would be most useful when they realise that the extent of support needed by SMEs in those countries is very high. They should, therefore, devote more active resources and capabilities and be prepared to be active in network facilitation over a longer period than previously thought.

5 Conclusions, limitations and future research

Our study analysed the role of institutional actors in the internationalisation of emerging African market SMEs. Our findings provide theoretical, managerial and policy implications that can support the development of all these three aspects of the positive development of emerging African markets.

The results of the current study have revealed three varied views related to the context and in so doing has provided a new perspective on claims addressed by the institutional view and network school of thought.

For future research, further studies on the internationalisation of emerging market SMEs both qualitatively and quantitatively will be key to helping researchers contribute to marketing theory, managerial knowledge and policies to develop SMEs internationalisation. We encourage researchers to explore how the concepts of political will and political relations evolve in international business contexts, their impacts on improving the competitiveness of emerging market SMEs and how they can be maintained and developed for the benefit of continuing growth in emerging African markets. Additionally, it is important to study their roles in ensuring preferential treatment that can provide the initial basis through which internationalising African SMEs can overcome their competitive disadvantages when compared with the more established competitors from other emerging parts of the world.

The textile industry has been shown to be a take-off industry for early emerging markets (Ahmed, 2009; Rock, 2001). While the AGOA is not the only preferential trade agreement awarded to African or other emerging countries, it is relatively unique in the strategies used to promote the labour-intensive textile industry (among other industries) and the preferences for production in Africa. With more insightful studies such as ours, other researchers can undertake cross-sectional, survey research that will test the findings on an African or emerging market level.

Finally, the limitations of the study cannot be ignored. The single case can be criticised as a weakness. Generalising from a single case study has several limitations. However, the benefit and contributions of a qualitative single case study as ours is not to achieve statistical generalisation, but contextual generalisation within the clarified boundaries of the research. In addition studies such as ours provide extended contextual knowledge and information that generate useful contextual and analytical knowledge. Such knowledge can provide a basis for further study (qualitative and quantitative), the foundation for the generation of hypotheses and a consideration of the implications, such as those emphasised in the foregoing sections and by many previous researchers (Abebrese, 2014; Dana, 2017; Dana and Dumez, 2015; Farquhar, 2012; Gray, 2014; Yin, 2016).

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