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The Influence of Learning Orientation on Performance of Micro and Small Agro-Processing Enterprises in Tanzania

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Abstract
Firms that operate in dynamic and competitive business environment require strong learning orientation in building competitive edge and accelerating their performance. This study examines the influence of learning orientation on performance of micro and small agro-processing enterprises in Tanzania. Learning view holds that, organizations that can learn the business environment are in a better position to improve their performance than their rivals. However, there exists scant literature on the relationship between learning orientation and performance, specifically, in micro and small agro-processing enterprises in developing economies like Tanzania. The current study put forward in contributing to the existing knowledge with empirical evidences relating to the learning orientation dimensions of commitment to learning, open-mindedness and shared vision with a firm performance. The present study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, whereby, the data were collected through structured questionnaires from 302 agro-processing firms in Dar es Salaam, Morogoro and Arusha regions in Tanzania. The analysis was performed through Structural Equation Modeling with SPSS IBM AMOS software version 21. The findings revealed that, all the three constructs of learning orientation have positive significant influence on the firm performance. This suggests that, the agro-processing MSEs should strengthen their learning behaviour for better business performances. Besides, policies related to agro-processing should provide enabling environment for the small firms to learn and build their competitiveness for the improved performances.

Key words: Learning Orientation, Micro and Small Enterprise (MSEs), Agro-processing, Performance.

1.0 Introduction

Studies on performance of Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) have attracted the interest of many researchers world-wide. This is due to the critical role played by these firms in the economic development of the countries. The MSEs provide numerous employment opportunities, create income and act as a mechanism for poverty reduction (Lestari, Leon, Siwyastuti, Brabo, Putra, 2020; Mamo, 2022). In the developing economies like Tanzania, the micro and small businesses are seen as a mechanism for improving income distribution, stimulating income growth and reshaping economic structure which have been highly reliant on activities of large firms (Majenga & Mashenene, 2015; Kosa, Mohammad, & Ajibie, 2018). Specifically, the micro and small agro-processing firms in Tanzania play a crucial role in linking various economic sectors for the country's development (Ekblom, 2016). The sector forms backward links with the agriculture sector and forward linkages with transporters, resellers and food service sectors (Kipene, Lazaro, & Isinika, 2015; Dalberg , 2017).

The agro-processing sector in Tanzania is one among the identified priority sectors in accelerating the attainment of country's development plans (Ministry of Finance and Planning, 2016a). The sector has potentials of creating employment avenues in product processing, packaging and labelling, costing, marketing as well as selling and distributing products to customers (Mehta, 2012; Dora, Kumar, & Gellynck, 2015). However, the performance of the sector has remained relatively low. For example, statistical data shows that, in year 2016 the agro-processing sector contributed only 3.76% to GDP while other sectors like

services and agriculture contributed more than 30% in the same year, (Mazungunye & Punt, 2021). Moreover, it is estimated that, about 75% of the small gro-processing firms in Tanzania operate under capacity to unleash their potentials in contributing to the countrys' GDP (Tisimia, 2014; Muriithi, 2017).

A number of factors either within the firm or from the external business environment hinder the performance of micro and small agro-processing firms in Tanzania. Notably, high competition in which the agro-processing MSEs operate and increased customer choices in the market has resulted into loss of customers by MSEs to more competitive products in the market (Ekblom, 2016; Daninga , 2020). The availabliity of more competing products in the market tends to increase customer attrition rate and customer movement from one supplier to another looking for superior products and services (Kanake & Karanja, 2018). This situation puts small firms into a disadvantage in competition and performance in the market compared to large firms which mostly have resources and skills for marketing and researching for developing competitive edge (Kapinga & Montero, 2017).

With ever changing business environment and customer needs, learning becomes the best option for small business firms (Herath and Karunaratne,2017; Cocci , 2017). Unarguably, appropriate learning orientation can put the agro-processing MSEs into a competitive advantage in identifying affordable sources of finance, raw materials, good product processing pratices and the available market opportunities where products can be sold. This argument is in line with the organizational learning theory (Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier, 1997) and knowledge-based theory (Grant, 1996b) which postulates that, business organizations that are better in attracting and absorbing market knowledge from the environment are likely to perform better than their counter parts. Accordingly, learning is considered as one of the best strategic resources for small firms with limited resources to invest in aggressive marketing campaigns (Bengesi & Le Roux, 2014b). Despite the importance of learning orientantion in MSEs, scant literature exists which relates learning orientation and performance in the context of agro-processing MSEs in developing economies like Tanzania. Hence, the current study was set to determine the infulence of learning orientation on performance of agro-processing MSEs in Tanzania, aiming at responding to the gap in the empirical literature.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 The micro and small agro-processing enterprises in Tanzania

Basing on the level of economic development, countries have different definitions for micro, small and medium size enterprises (MSMEs). In Tanzania, the MSMEs are described by the number of employees, capital investment in machinery and the nature of activities carried out by the firms. The Tanzanian SMEs policy (Ministry of Industry and Trade (MIT), 2003) defines micro firms as those with 1 to 4 employees and capital investment of up to TZS 5million; small scale firms are those with 5 to 49 employees and capital investment of TZS above 5million up to TZS 200 million while medium size are the firms with 50 to 99 employees and capital above TZS 200million up to TZS 800million. Large business firms are the ones with more than 100 employees and capital investment of more than TZS 800m. The mostly preferred definition of MSMEs is categorization by the number of employees and capital level in machinery. The number of employees and capital investment in machinery are preferred in defining MSMEs because of easy access of these information. Nevertheless, in situation where it is difficult to precisely define the business due to mismatch between the number of employees and capital categories provided, the policy explains that the definition basing on the capital level should precede.

Regarding the activities carried out by the firms, the MSMEs in Tanzania are categorized under manufacturing, services, mining, and commerce sectors. The agro-processing MSEs fall under manufacturing activities that transform agriculture outputs into various forms of finished and semi-finished products (Mehta, 2012). The agro-processing firms play a vital role in adding value to agriculture products, ensuring food security, palatability and in management of food demand seasonality through extended product shelf- lives especially for highly perishable agriculture goods (UNDP, 2017). Majority of agro-processing MSMEs are at micro and small-scale levels (Kamuzora,2013; John, 2020). The MSEs in agro-processing engage in processing of foods and non-food products. Food agro-processing involves vegetable processing, dairy products, cereal milling, bakeries, peanut butter and honey processing. On the other hand, non-food processing involves leather and clothes products. The current study was confined on food agro-

processing MSEs with an understanding that, these firms form the large portion of agro-processing firms in Tanzania (Mazungunye & Punt, 2021).

The market of the agro-processed products in Tanzania is highly competitive with many producers ranging from micro, small, medium and large-scale firms (Ekblom, 2016). The market is also flooded with substitutes and imported processed products from other parts of the world (Mwang'onda, Mwaseba, & Juma, 2018). Increased number of players in the agro-processing business is a result of policy deregulation towards privatization, free market policies, regional integrated markets and open market economies (Valmohammadi, 2017; Muriithi, 2017). Remarkably, increased customer choices and competition affect negatively the micro and small firms since they lose customers to larger competing businesses resulting into low sales and stagnant performances in MSEs (Farhikhteh, Kazemi, Shahin, & Shafiee, 2020). Thus, for the agro-processing MSEs to remain relevant in the market, owner-managers need to possess capabilities in learning the market forces and adapting to the changes (Huang, Ding, & Chen, 2014; Omri, 2015).

2.2 Performance measurements in small business

Performance in business context is referred to as the attainment of pre-set goals and objectives of a business expressed in financial, non-financial terms or both (Rashid, Ismail, Rahman, & Afthanorhan, 2018). On the other hand, performance in business is described as the capability of producing outcomes in line with the prior set targets (Salleh, et al., 2018). The commonly used measures of performance in small businesses include sales revenue, profits, changes in number of employees, gross-profit margin and customer satisfaction, and change in number of customers (Sharmeela-Banu, Gengeswari, & Padmashantini, 2013; Dar & Mishra, 2020; Hussain, Shah, & Khan, 2016; Michna & Kmieciak, 2020; Dar & Mishra, 2020).

It is noteworthy that, there is no consensus and homogenous measure of performance, rather, the use of a specific performance measure depends on business context, type of the industry, the goals of the business owner and practices in place (Bulak & Turkyilmaz, 2014; Dar & Mishra, 2020). On the other hand, the previously used measures of performance are used to set grounds for future studies of performance in small business context. In the current study, performance was measured by the total sales revenue and change in number of customers in agro-processing MSEs. The two measures were used with an understanding that, strong learning orientation would result into creation of customer value through products which meet customer expectations, attracting more customers into the business which ultimately would have positive effects on the sales revenue. The total sales revenue was measured objectively while change in number of customers in agro-processing MSEs was subjectively captured.

2.3 The Concept of Learning Orientation

Learning orientation refers to the extent to which organisations obtain and share information related to changes in the marketplace, customers' expectations and needs, competitors' actions and new technological developments in order to create new products or services that are superior to those of competitors (Calantone, Cavusgil, & Zhao, 2002; Pett & Wolff, 2016). On the other hand, learning orientation is considered a strategic resource that influence the way a business firms operate in the market place (Dukeov, Bergman, Heilmann, & Nasledov, 2020). Thus, the whole organization learning is developed through learning individual members where they share knowledge with other members to benefit the entire entity.

Basically, strong learning orientation prevents business firms from being reactive as it gives an avenue for the organization members to question the ways in which business is conducted and the assumptions underlying business practices that respond to market changes (Mahmoud, Blankson, Owusu-Frimpong, Nwankwo, & Trang, 2016). In the context of small businesses, learning occurs through sharing experience and interpersonal relationships among members who act as agents to screen and share changes in the market place (Cocci, 2017). The concept of learning orientation was developed from the organization learning theory through which Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier (1997) described learning orientation as commitment to learning, open-mindedness and shared vision. On the other hand, Calantone, Cavusgil and Zhao (2002)

define learning orientation as commitment to learning, open-mindedness, shared vision and intra-organizational knowledge sharing.

The variation in number of constructs that explain learning orientation as proposed by the two aforementioned authors has influenced scholar's selection of the construct of learning orientation. Basically, the use of the measures of learning orientation has based on the nature and the context of the study. In consistency with majority of studies in small businesses, the current study followed Sinkula et al (1997)'s perspective in defining learning orientation to include commitment to learning, open-mindedness and shared vision. Notably, owner-managers are responsible for setting learning environment in their businesses. Hence, the current study preassumes that, owner-managers of the agro-processing MSEs need to develop learning committment of the customer needs and changes in the market including competitive action. Also, they need to open doors to new ideas and knowledge while working in the same learning direction to maximuly attain their organizational goals.

2.3.1 Commitment to learning

Learning occurs when individuals see that learning is the best survival element and that they put all their personal disposals towards learning (Pastor, Gutiérrez, & Agudob, 2018). Learning commitment helps business firms to be availed with information from internal and external environment business to facilitate informed decisions (Rostini, Souisa, Masmarulan, & Yasin, 2021). Accordingly, it is believed that, owner-managers show commitment to learning where they proactively spot market changing trends which could affect their business operations in the future and actively adjust their business strategies and practices (Mishra & Mohanty, 2018; Mahmoud, Blankson, Owusu-Frimpong, Nwankwo, & Trang, 2016). Thus, with the dynamic business environment in agro-processing and fast-changing customer needs of the agro-processed products, strong learning commitment is inevitable.

2.3.2 Open-mindedness

Open-mindedness is a character that attracts new ideas and knowledge. Open-mindedness facilitates brainstorming of big ideas while allowing employees to question business practices that respond to the market requirements (Dukeov, Bergman, Heilmann, & Nasledov, 2020). An organization which opens doors for new views and knowledge provides the employees with avenues to scale up their learning above the level required by their current job (Zayed & Alawad, 2017). Thus, in business situations where the owner-manager is highly open-minded, it is expected that he is able to capture variety of market information that may enhance business competitiveness and performance (Calisir, Altin, & Guzelsoy, 2013; Herath & Karunaratne, 2017).

2.3.3 Shared Vision

Shared vision in learning is described as a building block for other learning orientation dimensions as it provides a direction for learning (Herath & Karunaratne, 2017). Shared vision entails bringing individuals in the organization at a similar level of understanding. With a shared vision in mind, members are brought in the common understanding of what information to capture from customers, competitors, suppliers and other market stakeholders. Hence, as commitment to learning and open-mindedness describe the intensity of learning, shared vision provides the direction and quality of learning (Pastor, Gutiérrez, & Agudob, 2018). Without commitment and agreement to which direction the firm is taking, the motivation to learn is likely to be less (Kumar, Jabarzadeh, Jeihouni, & Garza-Reyes, 2020).

2.4 Learning orientation and business performance

A number of studies have linked learning orientation with performance in different business contexts. For instance, significant relationship between learning orientation and performance was observed in the studies by Pett and Wolff, (2016); Herath and Karunaratne (2017) the studies which were conducted in small and medium sized manufacturing firms, and born global ICT firms respectively. Besides, Pastor, Gutiérrez and Agudob (2018), presented significant relationship between learning orientation and performance of service based firms while Rostini, Souisa, Masmarulan and Yasin (2021) found a significant relationship between

learning orientation and silk processing SMEs. All these studies were conducted in business contexts different from food agro-processing MSEs, hence limiting generalizability of the findings.

Contrary to the positive significant relationship indicated in the preceded studies, Beneke, Blampied, Dewar and Soriano (2016) found neither significant nor positive relation between owner-manger's learning orientation and firm performance. Again, Mahmoud, Blankson, Owusu-Frimpong, Nwankwo and Trang (2016) indicated that, learning orientation of a firm has no direct effect on its performance unless mediated by other factors such as innovation. Similar observation was reported by Yuan, Feng, Lai and Collins (2018) on his study on logistic service firms. The study observed that, there is no direct link between owner- managers' learning orientation and the performance of logistic service firms.

Besides, Cho and Lee (2020) established that, the relationship between learning orientation and financial performance of a firm should be mediated by customer and competitor oriented practices. Likewise, Martinez, Serna and Montoya, (2020) indicated that only commitment to learning and open-mindedness constructs of learning have positive significant relationship with firm performance while shared vision was found to have negative significant influence on performance.The study by Zhao, Li, Lee and Chen (2011) considered learning orientation as a precursor for small firm's survival. Despite the mixed results presented by different authors pertaining to the relationship between learning orientation and performance of the firms, the studies were conducted in firms with different operating characteristics from agro-processing MSEs. Markedly, Bertelsen, Bødke, Eriksson, Hoggan andVermeulen (2019) indicate that, research work should strive to be particular in context, industry, theories, techniques, methods and results. On the other hand, the contradicting results on the relationship between learning orientation and firm performance provide reasons for more studies to test the relationship in different business settings. Hence, the current study hypothesizes that:

H1: *Learning orientation has significant influence on the performance of agro-processing MSEs in Tanzania.*

3.0 Methodology and research design

3.1 Study area

The study was conducted in Dar es Salaam, Morogoro and Arusha regions in Tanzania. The three regions were selected to represent other regions since performance problem of the agro-processing MSEs is prevalent throughout the country. Besides, the three regions have high concentration of manufacturing establishments compared to other parts of the country where as agro-processing firms form the largest part of these establishments (National Bureau of Statistics(NBS) & Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment (MITI), 2018). The high concentration of agro-processing MSEs in the selected regions ensures data availability, accessibility and sufficiency the factors that are among the critical determinants of the study area (Hodgson, et al., 2020). Likewise, high concentation of MSEs increases competition in the selected regions the situation that may necessiate MSEs to apply proper learning behaviour in order to understand the changing behaviour of the market. It is notewothy that, data were collected from the urban parts(town centres) of the study area. The decision of collecting data urban in areas was informed with the evidence that, most of the agro-processing firms in Tanzania are located in urban areas and town centres, because of good infrastructure and easy access to markets than in rural parts of the country (Kamuzora, 2013; Tisimia, 2014)

3.2 *Research approach, design and sampling procedures*

The study employed quantitative approach and cross-sectional survey design. The quantitative approach enabled the examination of the causal relationship between owner- manager's learning orientation and the performance of agro-processing MSEs. With cross-sectional design, the data were collected only once from many agro-processing firms which enabled the control of other factors and explanations that could arise as a result of time lapse during data collection exercise (Saunders, Lewis , & Thornhill, 2016; John, Mwakalobo, & Bengesi, 2019). The population of the study was the micro and small agro-processing firms whereas the unity of inquiry was the owner-managers. Owner-managers were considered relevant because most of the information in small businesses is possessed by owner-managers and they are involved in main decisions of

their businesses (Cicea, Popa, Marinescu , & Ștefan, 2019). A list of registered agro-processing MSEs was obtained from SIDO and Municipal council offices. The sample was drawn from a total of 1690 registered MSEs in the three regions. The formula proposed by Yamane (1967) was used to calculate the sample, whereby a confidence level of 95% and a marginal error of 0.05 were applied as demonstrated in the equation:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+Ne^2}$$

N= population size, n= sample size and e = level of precision (margin of error limit)

$$n = \frac{1690}{1+1690\times 0.05^2} = 323.445 \approx 323$$

A stratified sampling procedure was carried out to select a sample for the study. The regions were picked purposely followed with proportionate number of agro-processing MSEs in the respective regions. The agro-processing activities were placed under homogenous strata in each region and proportionate number of each category of activity was picked. A stratified sampling was considered relevant given the nature of the study. Basically, proportionate stratified sampling provides high statistical accuracy and it is easy to carry than other random sampling techniques (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2014)

3.3 Measurement of key variables

3.3.1 Learning orientation

Learning orientation of the owner-managers was measured using 5 points Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree, the responses that measured their commitment to learning (CtoL), open-mindedness (OPEN_M) to new information and shared vision (SV). The scale was adapted from Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier (1997) who related three dimensions of learning with the performance of a firm. Notably, the learning orientation scale used in the current study has been used in a number of previous studies of similar nature including the scholarly works of Herath and Karunaratne (2017), Yuan, Feng, Lai and Collins (2018), Martinez, Serna and Montoya (2020) and Rostini, Souisa, Masmarulan, and Yasin (2021).

3..3.2 Performance

The performance of agro-processing MSEs was measured using total sales (TSales) as a financial indicator and change in number of customers (CNC) as a non-financial indicator. With an understanding that, micro and small firms may be reluctant in exposing their financial information with a fear of tax implications and other government levies (Rashid, Ismail, Rahman, & Afthanorhan, 2018), questions on sales were asked indirectly. The respondents were asked to identify their average sales in the previous day, week or month. Additionally, with an understanding that the agro-processing business could be affected by seasonality, the respondents were also asked to identify their average sales in low, moderate and high seasons. On the other hand, data on change of number of customers was captured by asking respondents whether there was change in number of customers in their businesses for past three years from the data collection period, the items which were placed on 5 points Likert scale in increase- decrease continuum.

The study measured the performance of MSEs that have been in operation for at least three years as it is considered a reasonable time for the business to determine its direction and outcome (Kiwia, Bengesi, & Ndyetabula, 2019). In the course of the study, it was established that, the MSEs which have been in operation for at least three years had minimum capital of about TZS 3.5 million. Likewise, in order to avoid high diversity of results the study confined itself with firms with maximum capital of TZS 50 million. Hence, data were collected from agro-processing MSEs that have been in the operation for at least three years, with capital ranging from TZS 3.5million to TZS 50 million and with 2 to 20 employees the category which falls under micro and small firms in Tanzania.

4.0 Data collection and analysis

The data were collected through structured questionnaires which were distributed to the targeted respondents. The collected data were checked for completeness and clarity of responses. A total of 21 questionnaires were found unusable, making total responses to be 302 which is about 93.5%; the response rate which was found to be good. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used in analysing the data. In the first place, a confirmatory factor analysis was carried out using SPSS version 21 and all factor loadings that resulted into Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 and above were considered strong constructs that explain latent variables (Saunders, Lewis , & Thornhill, 2016). Confirmatory test was followed by structural modelling to test the hypothesized relationship whereas $p< 0.05$ was considered significant (Creswell, 2014).

4. 1 Validity and Reliability

Confirmatory factor analysis was done to test the reliability and validity of learning orientation constructs. In the first place, fit indexes of the proposed model were calculated. The proposed model was found to better fit the data than the alternative models with χ^2/df index of the proposed model equals to 4.34 which is less than the recommended value 5. On the other hand, the values of GFI (0.958) and CFI (0.936) indices were found to be greater than recommended value of 0.9. Moreover, the value of RMSEA (0.033) was observed to be less than the recommended cut off point of < 0.05. The obtained fit statistics versus recommended values imply that the proposed CFA model of learning orientation in agro-processing MSEs was found to be better than any other alternative model. The results of fit statistics are presented in the Table 1.

Table 1 Fit statistics of the Structural model for leaning orientation

Fit statistic	Recommended	Obtained
χ^2	-	735.385
Df	-	169
χ^2/df	<5	4.340
GFI	>0.90	0.958
CFI	>0.90	0.936
RMSEA	<0.05	0.033

Secondly, reliability and construct validity were assessed to establish whether the individual items explain the constructs of learning orientation. The results were presented in relation to Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Maximum Shared squared Variance (MSV) as shown in Table 2. With composite reliability the values were, 0.909 (shared vision), 0.905 (Commitment to learning) and 0.926 (Open-mindedness). All values of composite reliability were at least 0.7 indicating good level of internal consistency (Hair Jr, Babin, & Krey 2017). On the other hand, AVE values of the analyzed data were found to be good measures of construct validity. Literature present that, the AVE values should be greater than 0.5 and less than the composite reliability (Creswell, 2012). Results in table 2 indicate that, all the AVE values of learning orientation dimensions are greater the 0.5 and less than the composite reliability values. Accordingly, discriminant validity is achieved when the AVE is greater than Maximum shared squared variance (MSV) (Hamann, Schiemann, Bellora, & Guenthe, 2013).

Table 2 Indicators of reliability, convergent and discriminant validity

	CR	AVE	MSV
Shared Vision (SV)	0.909	0.627	0.161
Commitment to Learning (CtoL)	0.905	0.614	0.161
Open-mindedness (OPEN-M)	0.926	0.715	0.146

The confirmation test established that, the constructs of learning orientation are valid and reliable to be used in the model testing. The confirmatory test was followed by structural modelling whereby the hypothesized relationship was tested. Besides, performance related factors including business size, type of business, age of the business and education level of the owner-manager were included in the model as control variables (Bengesi, 2013; Neneh, 2018; Michna & Kmieciak, 2020).

4.2 Results and Discussion

Our study focused on determining the influence of learning orientation on the performance of the businesses. The statistical results are presented in Table 3. The regression results of learning orientation constructs on change in number of customers revealed that, commitment to learning (CtoL), open-mindedness(OPEN_M) and shared vision(SV) are positively and significantly associated with change in number of customers in agro-processing MSEs with $\beta = 0.498$, $p= 0.043$; $\beta = 0.177$, $p= 0.037$ and $\beta = 0.144$, $p= 0.041$ respectively. All the values were found to have $p<0.05$ which suggests significant level of relationship between learning orientation dimensions and change in numbers of customers. The results imply that, a unit change in dimensions of learning orientation cause significant change in number of customers in agro-processing MSEs. Learning commitment for example helps to identify both expressed and hidden customer needs, the information which is pertinent in the course of meeting customer expectations. Commitment to learning was explained by such characters of owner-managers by putting more emphasis on learning and consider it as a key ingredient to the business success, and participation in different business forums. It is also important to the systematically identified relevant knowledge for the business and the provision of a room for the employees to share knowledge with each.

Besides, with open-mindedness character owner-managers are able to receive information from different sources which enriches business decisions in regard to the target customers. This may include new products ideas, information on cost effective sources of raw material, brand and re-branding ideas, market expansion and positioning ideas all of which have implications on the number of customers enrolling in the business (Lestari, Leon, Siwyastuti, Brabo and Putra, 2020). On the other hand, shared vision keeps employees informed of the specific information to spot from the market to facilitate customer satisfaction. Assured customer in turn result into positive recommendations about the business and its products, hence, attracting more customers to the firm (Hawkins & Hoon , 2019)

The relationship between learning orientation and change in number of customers observed in the current study is consistent with the findings of Rostini, Souisa, Masmarulan and Yasin (2021) who indicated that, positive learning orientation facilitates meeting of customer expectations through identficating appropriate products, services and other marketing programmes which attract more customers to the business. On the same note, a study by Dimyati (2015) affirms that, learning and understanding the needs of the customers leads to customer satistifaction, retention and enrollment of new buyers of the product. The results are also supported by the studies of Herath and Karunaratne (2017) and De Clercq and Pereira (2020) who posited that, appropriate learning behaviour facilitate customer satisfaction and increased number of customers who use firm's products.

Moreover, the results of the present study support that, there is a positive significant relationship between learning orientation and total sales of the agro-processing MSEs. The commitment to learning construct presented a positive and significant relationship with the total sales revenue ($\beta = 0.173$, $p<0.001$). These results are consistent with Pastor, Gutiérrez, & Agudob, (2019) who observed that, commitment to learning has positive significant influence on the sales of the micro, small and medium enterprises. Similar results were found in the work of Martinez, Serna and Montoya (2020) who showed that, commitment to learning is crucial character in improving sales level of small firms and that the sustainable performance of small firms depends on their ability to learn and quickly respond to the market changes.

On the hand, our findings established that, total sales were significant and positively influenced by open-mindedness with statistical estimations $\beta = 0.344$ and $p<0.001$. The results suggest that, with open-mindedness character, the owner-managers of the agro-processing MSEs can openly receive customers concerns and suggestions and incorporate them in the product processing and other business decisions that

have direct impact on the total sales. The results are supported by the work of Dukeov, Bergman, Heilmann and Nasledov (2020) who posit that, open-mindedness is an important character which facilitate firm's adaptation to new ideas for the improved performance. This shows that, open-minded owner-managers can quickly act on the competitive information that otherwise if not well worked upon could erode sales revenue of a firm. Shared vision was also found to positively and significantly influence the total sales of the agro-processing MSEs with $\beta =$ 0.174 and p<0.003.These results bring an indication that, an increase in sharing of vision increases sales in agro-processing MSEs

Overall results on show that, with appropriate learning culture, the agro-processing MSEs can increase number of customers and total sales. The two performance indicators ultimately affect the financial position of the firm. Increase in number of customers affect sales and with high sales, the MSEs can expand its product lines and items to meet different customers' needs. It is noteworthy that, sales levels of a firm provide a distinction on the profitability especially in organizations of equal size which incur proportionate equal cost of sales and operating expenses. Thus, the agro-processing MSEs need to capitalize on continuous learning for increased number of customers and total sales in their firms.

Table 3 Regression results of the effect of owner-manager's learning orientation on performance of agro-processing MSEs.

Endogenous		**Exogenous**	**Estimate**	**S.E.**	**CR**	**P-Value**
CNC	<---	CtoL	0.498	0.246	2.024	0.043
	<---	OPEN_M	0.177	0.078	2.812	0.037
	<---	SV	0.144	0.323	0.446	0.041
TSales	<---	CtoL	0.173	0.031	5.581	<0.001
	<---	OPEN_M	0.344	0.05	6.925	<0.001
	<---	SV	0.174	0.058	3.018	0.003

5.0 Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to determine the influence of learning orientation on the performance of a firm. The study was conducted on micro and small scale agro-processing firms in three regions of Tanzania. The results reveal that, there a clear connection between learning orientation of agro-processing MSEs and the performance. The findings bring an indication that, owner-managers who put commitment in learning, share learning direction with other organization members and openly welcome new views related to the business are in a better position in improving the performance of their businesses.

It is noteworthy that, individuals with strong learning orientation can easily spot changing behaviour of customers, competitors' activities, suppliers and other information that influence firms 'operations and performance. Positive learning orientation provides organizations with pertinent information that are incorporated in business decisions related to the nature of the target markets, their needs, purchasing power and innovation decisions to optimize sales revenues and the overall performance of the firm (Herath and Karunaratne, 2017; Martinez, Serna, & Montoya, 2020).

Importantly, appropriate learning helps to capture feedback on customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction on the products and services, the information that act as a building stone for developing and revising business practices to develop techniques for capturing the attention of both existing and potential customers (Dimyati, 2015). Hence, the statistical evidence from this study shows that, the more the agro-processing MSEs is inclined to learning the higher the performance.

The present study, therefore, extends the existing knowledge pertaining to the effects of learning orientation on performance specifically in the context of small firms that have limited resources to invest in research and aggressive marketing campaigns to attract more customers into their products. For that reason, the findings bring a lesson that, the agro-processing MSEs that wish to improve their performance should develop strong learning orientation and ensure that they proactively capture market information to serve their customers better than the competing firms. This could be enhanced by incorporating learning as an

important element in business operations and allowing members to share ideas and learnt knowledge from different avenues.

Improved performance of the agro-processing sector implies more strong linkage with agriculture, food services, distributors, resellers in both domestic and international markets thus providing substantial employment opportunities and raise income at individual and national level. Accordingly, practitioners in agro-processing sectors need to emphasize on improving learning behaviour and build business environment that support learning for enhancing the competitiveness of MSEs and consequently their performance. This requires support of government and other non-government institutions to subsidize business management and marketing trainings for the agro-processing MSEs.

6.0 Limitations

Despite the positive significant relationship observed between learning orientation and performance of agro-processing MSEs, a few limitations are presented in the study providing a room for further studies in the discipline. Firstly, the empirical evidence was drawn from Tanzanian business environment in which competitiveness, learning culture, and resourcefulness of agro-processing may differ from other business settings that have different cultural and economic environment. Secondly, the study was more specific on agro-processing firms which differ in operations from other economic activities hence limiting generalizability of the results.Lastly, the data were collected at one point in time (cross-sectional), as a consequence, further studies could consider longitudinal studies to ascertain whether the relationship between learning orientation and firm performance is affected by other factors that are related to time differences during data collection.

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