

Exploring Theoretical Framework: Propensity of Nigerian Indigenous Construction Firms for Expansion into the International Market

^{1,2}Mohammed Isa YUSUF, ²Natalia A. ANIGBOGU, and ²Audu Ibrahim Isa DAKAS

¹Department of Building, Modibbo Adama University, Yola, Nigeria

² Department of Building, University of Jos, Nigeria

Corresponding Author's email: yusufisa06@mau.edu.ng; yusufisa06@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Expansion of firms into the International Construction Market (ICM) is a well-established area of research in international construction literature. However, in Nigeria studies were mainly on the plight of Nigerian Indigenous Construction Firms (NICFs) and the dominance of the Nigerian construction industry by Multinational Corporations (MNCs). It is a matter of concern that there is no known study that explored the internationalisation of NICFs with a view to integrating NICFs into the ICM in view of the benefits which include prestige, opportunity for growth, increased profits, risk sharing among others. This paper presents a theoretical framework for expansion of NICFs into the ICM with a view to integrating NICFs into the ICM. The paper used the literature review approach and content analysis for the study and adopted three independent but interrelated theories; the Resource based view theory, the Network theory, and the Institutional theory to explain the internationalisation of NICFs, and to develop the theoretical framework. The research has implications on theory, policy and practice: It will elicit government's support towards policy formulation on internationalisation and positively influence managers of NICFs to strategically consider expansion of NICFs into the ICM. It will also stimulate further research into this important area in Nigeria and the Diaspora.

Keywords: Expansion, International construction market, theoretical framework, Nigeria indigenous construction firms.

1. INTRODUCTION

The construction industry has long been recognised as one of the earliest internationalised sectors of the global economy (Ngowi, Pienaar, Talukhaba, & Mbachu, 2005). Navigating the International Construction Market (ICM), however, presents considerable complexity due to the inherent nature of construction projects and the diverse environments of foreign country (Gunhan & Arditi, 2005a; Utama, Chan, Gao, & Zahoor, 2017; Virasanai & Alias, 2020). Despite these challenges, the ICM offers substantial opportunities for growth within the construction sector.

Firms are increasingly able to expand their operations internationally, undertaking building and construction projects in new markets (Albtoush, Doh, Rahman, Al-Momani, 2022; Gunhan, 2020; Mat Isa, Adnan, Endut, & Basrah, 2006). Consequently, the international expansion of construction firms into the ICM has become a popular and extensively researched topic (Azman, Hon, Paul, & Skitmore, 2021; Jung, Han, Koo, & Jang, 2012; Alaswal & Alduais, 2019). This interest is fuelled by the significant growth of international construction contractors, and the increasing attention they garner (Jang, Song, Park, & Ahn, 2020; Utama, Chan, Zahoor, & Gao, 2016).

Nevertheless, much of the existing research in this domain originates from the developed nations such as USA, UK, Singapore, potentially reflecting specific regional contexts (e.g. Gunhan, 2020; Jang, Ahn, Park, Lee, & Kwon, 2019; Jang, Kwon, Ahn, Lee, & Park, 2019; Utama et al., 2016; Wang, Chan, He, & Xu, 2020). While some studies have explored firm internationalisation in regions like South Africa, Tanzania, and Mozambique, they have primarily concentrated on Multinational Corporations (MNCs) (for instance: Mjema & Kessy, 2016; Nhabinde,

Marrengula, & Ubisse, 2012; Odediran, 2016; Rutashobya & Jaensson, 2004). It is also worth noting that a growing number of construction firms from different developing economies including Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Korea, Turkey are actively entering international construction markets (Maqsoom, Khan, Ali, Mehmood, 2016; Setiawana, Erdogan, & Ogunlana, 2015; Sunindijo et al., 2019; Utama, Chan, Zahoor, Gao, & Peli, 2018).

Internationalisation, in the context of a construction firm, can be defined in two ways: either as a firm head-quartered in one country operating in another, or as a firm based domestically undertaking projects for clients from foreign countries (Ngowi et al., 2005; Affum, 2010). Therefore, this study defines the expansion of Nigerian Indigenous Construction Firms (NICFs) into the International Construction Market (ICM) as encompassing internationalisation, international expansion, across border construction services, or export of construction expertise/services. The process involves a firm transitioning from operating solely within its domestic market to engaging with international markets, aligning with the definitions provided by Alashwal and Ann (2019), and Cheong (2010).

The NICFs are typically characterised as small and medium sized enterprises based workforce size and contracts volume or turnover (Ogbu, 2017). Within Nigeria, research has examined the challenges and activities of NICFs within the domestic/Nigerian construction industry. Notable examples include Suberu (2019) work on factors influencing the patronage and performance of (local) indigenous construction contractors in Jos metropolis, and Idoro and Bamidele (2017) study on the involvement of expatriate and indigenous consultants in construction project delivery in Nigeria construction project delivery.

Omotayo and Kulatunga (2017) further contributed by investigating post-contract cost controlling techniques in the Nigerian context. Achuen, Izam and Bustani (2000) explored the broader activities of indigenous contractors in Nigeria, revealing the dominance of MNCs in the sector. Abisuga, Amusu, and Salvador (2014) focused on perception of indigenous and multinational construction firms on construction delay, finding that projects by indigenous firms were more prone to delays than those managed by MNCs. Aniekwu and Audu (2010), similarly observed that foreign firms demonstrated superior project management skills, and achieved higher productivity levels compared to Nigerian Indigenous Construction firms.

Furthermore, Ogbu's research indicated that MNCs generally possessed established risk management policies (Ogbu, 2011), and more comprehensive marketing strategies and key performance indicators (Ogbu, 2017), leading to superior quality performance outcomes. Dakas (2014) developed a conceptual model for effective stakeholder management in Nigerian public sector projects, highlighting weaknesses in stakeholder management practices, including a lack of understanding, and formal processes, as well as poor system of project information/data management. Adding to this understanding, Bala, Bello, Kolo, and Bustani (2009) assessed factors hindering the growth of local Nigerian construction firms, emphasizing the crucial role of both governments and the private sector in capacity development. Idoro and Akinkumi (2017) raised concern about the long term viability of NICFs, citing high bankruptcy rates, inconsistent work quality, mismanagement, financial irregularities, and broader economic instability

Tunji-Olayeni, Mosaku, Fagbenle, and Omuh (2017) investigated competitive strategies among Nigerian Indigenous Construction Firms, concluding that many lacked investments in strategic management practices. Critically, initial literature review revealed a significant gap in research concerning the expansion of NICFs into the ICM. To date, there is no known study/research that specifically investigated this phenomenon with the aim of integrating NICFs into the ICM (Yusuf, 2023).

Indeed, the activities of NICFs are conspicuously absent from major international construction reports that analyse industry trends, legal developments, and market insights, reports often

featuring perspectives from global construction groups and multinational professional service networks like KPMG, Deloitte and Touché, Oxford Business Group, Global Construction Outlook, and PricewaterhouseCoopers International Limited (PwC). Consequently, fundamental questions remain unanswered: Do NICFs internationalize? If so, into which specific countries and markets do they expand? And what strategies do they employ for international expansion (Yusuf, 2023)?

This scarcity of research underscores that the expansion of NICFs into the ICM is an under-explored area, an issue yet to be definitively established (Yusuf, Anigbogu, & Dakas, 2024a, 2024b). Adding to this, it is a verifiable fact that for over two decades (2001-2024), Nigerian NICFs have been consistently absent from the Engineering News Record's (ENR) Top 250 international contractors list, a ranking based on revenue generated from projects outside firms' home countries (ENR, 2024; Yusuf, Anigbogu, & Dakas, 2024a, 2024b). It is also important to acknowledge that factors critical to internationalisation in some countries, such as the USA, may not hold the same significance in Nigeria.

Therefore, framework/models developed for construction firm' internationalisation in countries like China, Malaysia, Turkey, or the UK, may not be directly applicable to Nigeria. The relevance and success of different frameworks and models can vary significantly across country, depending on the nuances of their legal, social, economic, financial, local culture, political environments (Gunhan & Arditi, 2005a; Lozano-Torro et al., 2019; Viswanathan & Jha, 2020). Recognising this need for further research, scholars such as Alboutoush et al (2022), Gunhan (2020), Lozano-Torró et al (2019) and Odediran and Windapo (2018) have advocated for future investigation to deepen our understanding of internationalisation framework and models, particularly concerning their influence on success within the ICM.

This paper aims to contribute to this body of knowledge. Therefore, the objective is to explore and present a Theoretical framework to explain the propensity of NICFs for expansion into the ICM by exploring the explanatory powers of three (3) relevant and interconnected theoretical perspectives: The Resource-Based View theory, the Industrial Network Based theory, and the Institutional theory.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper adopted a literature review and Content analysis approach to explore the explanatory powers of three (3) relevant but inter-related theories: The Resource-based view theory, the Industrial Network theory, and the Institutional theory – in understanding the internationalisation of NICFs. The literature review method facilitated the collection of pertinent materials from diverse scholarly sources, including peer reviewed journals, on-line policy documents, and reports, conferences, proceedings, and libraries resources. These materials were then analysed using Content analysis.

This methodological combination is recognised as a robust strategy for synthesising research findings at a meta-level, revealing broader patterns and highlighting areas requiring further investigation (Marut, Anigbogu, Daniel, 2020). Such an approach is particularly well suited for construction theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Snyder, 2019). Systematic literature review, as employed here, are established research method involving the identifying and critical evaluation of relevant studies, alongside that systematic collection and analyses of data (Creswell, 2013).

Content analysis in turn, involves the quantitative analysis of text,- often through keywords, counts and comparative analysis-followed by a qualitative interpretation of the deeper contextual meaning embedded within the content (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2014). Therefore, the integration of

both literature review and content analysis provides a comprehensive and rigorous methodological framework for this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Theoretical Framework

While the expansion of firms into the ICM is frequently discussed in international construction literature, a universally accepted definition remains elusive, leading to inconsistent usage of the term. This ambiguity complicates efforts for researchers seeking to apply a single theoretical lens when examining the internationalisation of construction firms (Affam, 2010; Odediran, 2016; Ofori, 2003). Over time, numerous theories and models have emerged attempting to explain this phenomenon. For example, Affum (2010) suggested that any firm pursuing exports will likely encounter influences from various internationalisation theories; many of which are connected to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) theory.

Indeed, scholars have increasingly argued that relying on a single theoretical perspective is often insufficient, offering an incomplete picture of the complexities within foreign markets and the factors influencing a firm's choice of international markets entry strategies (Andersen, 1997; Goodnow, 1985). Therefore, rather than adhering to a single theory approach as advocated by Öz (2001), and Cuervo and Low (2003), this paper adopts a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach to illuminate the propensity of NICFs for expansion into the international construction market.

In essence, this research integrates multiple theories and models into a cohesive framework, aligning with recommendations made by Dunning (1980), and Malhotra, Agarwal, and Ulgado (2002). This combination of diverse theoretical perspectives aims to leverage on their individual strengths while mitigating their limitations, ultimately forging a more robust theoretical foundation, as supported by Abdul-Aziz and Wong (2010), Child & Rodrigues (2005), and Whitelock (2002). Consequently, this paper utilises three (3) distinct yet interconnected theories - Resource-based view theory, Industrial-network theory, and the Institutional theory – as the analytical framework for exploring the propensity of NICFs for expansion into the ICM.

3.2. Resource-based View Theory

The Resource-based view theory places significant emphasis both a firm's internal resources and external environmental factors (Choi, Cho, Han, Kwak, & Chih, 2018; Goh & Loosemore, 2016; Barney, 1991). At its core, the theory posits that possessing adequate and specialised expertise is critical for firms seeking success within the international construction market (Ekeledo & Sivakuma, 2004; Lindsay, Rod, & Ashill, 2015). Furthermore, it suggests that a firm's resources can be strategically deployed to cultivate a competitive advantage in a demanding market place (Goh & Loosemore, 2016).

Applying the RBV theory to the context of this study, it implies that if Nigerian Indigenous Construction Firms (NICFs) can effectively acquire, develop, and strategically manage valuable resources, they can successfully expand into the ICM and establish a competitive edge. However, a notable limitation of the RBV theory is its silence on practical methods for accessing such resources necessary for international expansion. It is well-documented that Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) often encounter entry barriers related to their size and limited resource availability, both financial and managerial.

This scarcity is often presumed to steer them towards less risky, lower-commitment entry modes, such as exporting, licensing, or joint ventures (JVs). Conversely, SMEs can also possess inherent advantages, particularly in capabilities like flexible, small-scale production and the agility to adapt product lines quickly. In essence, the inherent flexibility of SMEs allows them to rapidly

adjust their operational practices in response to the dynamic and evolving environments of the ICM.

This adaptability can effectively mitigate risks, while the entrepreneurial drive of top management enables a firm to identify and capitalize on market opportunities and navigate potential obstacles (Mat Isa, Saman, & Preece, 2015; Vigelius, 2017). Therefore, from an RBV perspective, NICFs must secure essential resources as a prerequisite for successful expansion into the ICM. Nevertheless, NICFs may be able to overcome the resource constraints and limited international experience typically associated with smaller firms to achieve competitiveness within the ICM. One potential avenue for this lies in building networks and fostering interactions with other organizations. This highlights the importance of exploring the Industrial Network-Based (INB) theory to address the limitations inherent in the RBV theory.

3.3. Industrial Network Theory

The Industrial Network theory underscores the importance of firms cultivating meaningful interactions within the International Construction Market (ICM). It centres on firm behaviour as it occurs within a web of inter-organizational and interpersonal connections. These relationships extend to customers, suppliers, competitors, both private and public support organizations, and even informal networks like family and friends (Abdul-Aziz & Wong, 2011; Coviello & Munro, 1997). According to this theoretical perspective, firms must develop and actively nurture diverse relationships with various actors within their network, both before and after initiating operations in their production chain (Ciravegna, Lopez, & Kundu, 2014; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977).

The fundamental tenets of the INB theory are twofold: first, that individual firms are inherently reliant on resources controlled by other entities, and second, that markets are dynamic and evolving networks composed of relationships between firms (Ciravegna, Lopez, & Kundu, 2014; Hosseini & Dadfar, 2012). This framework suggests that by fostering productive relationships and interactions with other firms, support agencies, customers, suppliers, and even competitors within the ICM, executives of Nigerian Indigenous Construction Firms (NICFs) can gain valuable insights, acquire essential information, secure resources, penetrate new markets, or gain access to advanced technologies.

These benefits, in turn, can facilitate the achievement of their strategic goals and effectively mitigate business risks. However, the Industrial Network-Based (INB) theory, in isolation, does not fully delineate the necessary structures that enable such interactions – structures typically provided by enabling institutions. For instance, Lo, Chiao, and Yu (2016), employing a network perspective, found that SMEs tend to favour wholly-owned subsidiaries when expanding into new markets under specific conditions: namely, when following existing customers into a host country, or when operations in that host country possess strong internal network linkages.

Conversely, they observed a preference for joint ventures when firms have robust supplier relationships. Nevertheless, a key limitation of the Industrial Network-Based (INB) theory in explaining the propensity of NICFs for international expansion lays in its assumption that proper networking can occur organically. In reality, effective networking necessitates an enabling environment, often provided by institutions, to guide and structure these crucial interactions and networks. Therefore, to fully understand the propensity of NICFs for internationalization, it becomes essential to consider Institutional Theory, recognizing that these relationships are significantly strengthened by the appropriate interplay between firms and relevant institutional frameworks.

3.1. Institutional Theory

Institutional theory elucidates the relationship between a firm and the institutional landscape within which it operates in the international construction environment. It emphasizes the crucial role of institutions in establishing a stable framework for political, economic, and social interactions within a society (Lindsay, Rod, & Ashill, 2015). In essence, this theory explains how institutions shape and govern political, economic, and social exchanges between countries and firms. Consequently, firms contemplating entry into foreign markets should meticulously evaluate the institutional environmental factors prevalent in host countries.

These factors include, but are not limited to, industrial policies, government-imposed restrictions on foreign investment, limitations on corporate operational scope, and the broader spectrum of governmental interventions (Lo, Chiao, & Yu, 2016). Such careful assessment is vital because the prevailing institutional environment of a host country significantly influences the selection of appropriate market entry modes (Azman, Hon, Xia, Lee, & Skitmore, 2021; Lo, Chiao, & Yu, 2016). A fundamental tenet of institutional theory is that a country's institutional environment - encompassing industrial policies, government-imposed limitations, and diverse governmental interventions expressed as rules, norms, and established routines-presents foreign firms with significant entry barriers when engaging in international business (Jung et al., 2010; Mohamed, 2017).

However, institutions are not solely restrictive; they can also offer advantages to firms capable of developing adaptive strategies that enable them to navigate and transcend institutional constraints (Azman et al., 2021; Lo, Chiao, & Yu, 2016). This implies that executives of NICFs can potentially leverage existing institutions within the ICM to their benefit, provided that NICFs cultivate the capacity to adapt effectively to the nuances of the ICM environment. A concise summary of the theories adopted for this study, their core assumptions, and their specific application to this research is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Theories, Basic Assumptions, and their Application to the Study

THEORY	RESOURCE BASE THEORY	INTERNATIONAL NETWORK THEORY	INSTITUTIONAL THEORY
Basic Assumptions of the theory	The basic assumption of the Resource-based view theory is that adequate resources & expertise are crucial for firms to succeed in the ICM, and How the resources of a firm could be strategically managed to build a competitive edge in a competitive market.	The basic assumption of the Industrial Network-Based theory is that the individual firm is dependent on resources controlled by other firms and that markets are stable and changing networks of relationships between firms.	The basic assumption of the Institutional theory is that country's institutional environments such as rules, norms, and routines make foreign firms to confront more entry barriers in doing international business
Application of theory to the study	If resources (valuable, rare, in-imitable, & non-substitutable) are managed strategically, NICFs can build competitive edge in the ICM	Interaction of NICFs with other firms ICM, agencies, customers, suppliers, competitors to learn new-Knowledge, gain information /resources.	Institutions may be beneficial to NICFs if they adapt to move beyond institutional constraints as it affects choice of entry modes

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have presented a theoretical framework designed to illuminate the propensity of NICFs for expansion into the ICM. This was accomplished through a rigorous literature review and content analysis, exploring the explanatory power of three interconnected theoretical lenses: Resource-Based View theory, Industrial Network-Based (INB) theory, and Institutional

theory. This framework is particularly pertinent given the current absence of NICFs from prominent international construction rankings, as consistently highlighted by reports such as ENR (2024), Yusuf (2023), Yusuf, Anigbogu, & Dakas (2024a), and Yusuf, Anigbogu, & Dakas (2024b).

Drawing upon the RBV theory (Goh & Loosemore, 2016), we posited that NICFs can potentially overcome resource limitations and a lack of extensive international experience – challenges often faced by smaller firms in the ICM. This could be achieved through strategic networking and robust interactions with other industry players. This rationale led us to explore the Industrial Network-Based (INB) theory as a means to address the inherent limitations of the RBV perspective in this context. The INB theory suggests that cultivating productive relationships with diverse stakeholders in the ICM - including firms, agencies, customers, suppliers, and even competitors – can enable NICFs executives to acquire new knowledge, gain critical market intelligence, secure essential resources, access new markets, and leverage advanced technologies. Such benefits are crucial for achieving strategic objectives and mitigating inherent business risks in international expansion.

However, the INB theory, in itself, does not fully address the structural elements necessary to facilitate these interactions, elements often provided by enabling institutions (Ciravegna, Lopez, & Kundu, 2014; Johanson, & Vahlne, 1977). Therefore, this paper turned to Institutional theory to further explain the potential pathways for NICF internationalisation, recognizing that robust inter-firm relationships are significantly strengthened within supportive institutional frameworks. Institutional theory offers the insight that while institutions can present constraints, they can also become assets if firms develop the adaptive capacity to navigate and leverage them effectively (Azman et al., 2021; Lo, Chiao, & Yu, 2016).

This suggests that NICF executives stand to benefit from existing ICM institutions, provided they cultivate organisational agility and adaptability within the international market environment. Furthermore, this study has underscored the conspicuous absence of NICF activities from major international construction reports that analyse critical industry trends, legal developments, and market dynamics (KPMG, 2024; Deloitte & Touché, 2024; Oxford Business Group, 2024; Global Construction Outlook, 2024; PricewaterhouseCoopers International Limited (PwC), 2024). This absence highlights a significant gap in existing research concerning the internationalisation of NICFs, indicating a paucity of scholarly attention to this specific area.

This paper offers notable implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, it provides a foundational framework for understanding the propensity of NICFs for internationalisation through the combined lens of RBV, INB, and Institutional theories. Practically, it serves as a call to action. It underscores the need for government support in formulating policies that encourage and facilitate internationalisation, and it aims to positively influence NICF leadership to strategically consider ICM expansion. Moreover, this work is intended to stimulate further scholarly inquiry into this underexplored area, both within Nigeria and among its diaspora.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Acknowledging the inherent scope limitations of this study, we recognize that this paper presents a theoretical framework – an initial step in understanding the propensity of NICFs for internationalisation through the explanatory power of RBV, INB, and Institutional theories. It is

not an exhaustive analysis and does not delve into the development of specific models or actionable strategies for NICFs international expansion. Therefore, future research is essential to gain a more granular understanding of the specific strategies that NICFs can effectively employ for successful international expansion. Based on these considerations, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Future research investigating the internationalisation of NICFs, particularly in developing conceptual frameworks for NICFs expansion into the ICM, should explicitly consider the explanatory power of the Resource-Based View theory, the Industrial Network-Based theory, and Institutional theory as integrated and relevant lenses for achieving ICM success.
2. The Federal Government of Nigeria should prioritize the provision of targeted support for policy formulation concerning the internationalisation of NICFs. This support should aim to create an enabling environment that positively encourages NICF managers to strategically pursue ICM expansion, recognizing its potential benefits for the Nigerian construction sector.
3. To address the identified scarcity of research on NICFs internationalisation, further scholarly investigation is urgently needed, both within Nigeria and amongst the Nigerian Diaspora, to deepen our understanding of this critical area.

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