



**Assessing the Challenges and Opportunities of Participating in Trade Fairs for Small-Scale Entrepreneurs
in Lagos: A Case Study of the Lagos International Trade Fair**

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ABSTRACT

Trade fairs are critical platforms for small-scale entrepreneurs, offering opportunities for market exposure, networking, and business development. The Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) is one of West Africa's most prominent trade events, attracting thousands of local and international participants annually. Despite its potential benefits, small-scale entrepreneurs often face financial, operational, and logistical challenges that limit their ability to fully leverage trade fair participation. This study examines the challenges and opportunities experienced by small-scale entrepreneurs at the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair, with the aim of generating insights that inform practical support and policy mechanisms for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). A qualitative research design was adopted, employing a case study approach to explore participants' experiences in depth. Data were collected through focus group discussions with small-scale entrepreneurs from diverse sectors, including fashion, food, technology, and crafts. Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns, highlighting both the benefits and limitations of trade fair engagement. Findings reveal that trade fairs enhance market visibility, facilitate business networking, and create opportunities for partnerships and market expansion. Government support and enabling policies further strengthen these outcomes by providing infrastructure, institutional support, and capacity-building initiatives. However, participants reported significant challenges, including high participation costs, competition with larger firms, limited strategic capacity, and difficulties sustaining business visibility post-event. The study concludes that while trade fairs offer substantial opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurs, targeted interventions such as subsidised participation, training programmes, and post-event engagement are essential to maximise their benefits. Insights from this research provide practical recommendations for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and trade fair organizers, aiming to enhance inclusivity, effectiveness, and long-term business growth for MSMEs in Lagos.

.Keywords: Lagos International Trade Fair, Market exposure, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), Trade fairs, Small-scale entrepreneurs

INTRODUCTION

Trade fairs are widely acknowledged as strategic platforms that facilitate business networking, market exposure, and exchange of goods and services for enterprises of all sizes. For small-scale entrepreneurs, participation in trade fairs can enhance visibility, attract potential customers, and open pathways to partnerships and market expansion (Gerschewski, Evers, Nguyen, & Froese, 2020). In the context of Lagos, Nigeria's commercial hub, the Lagos International Trade Fair held at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) is one of the most prominent trade exhibitions in West Africa, attracting thousands of exhibitors and visitors annually. The 2025 fair, organised by the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), aimed to attract approximately one million visitors and featured participation from exhibitors across multiple sectors and countries, highlighting its significance as a business gateway for both local and international stakeholders (Guardian Nigeria, 2025; MSME Africa, 2025).

Despite the potential advantages of such participation, small-scale entrepreneurs often face constraints that limit their ability to fully benefit from these events. These include financial challenges, logistical complexities, and competitive pressures from larger firms, which may diminish the capacity of

micro and small enterprises to capitalise on networking and market opportunities (Gerschewski et al., 2020). In Lagos, while trade fairs present opportunities for growth and connection, there remains limited empirical understanding of how small-scale entrepreneurs experience these events and the specific barriers they encounter.

This study therefore examines both the challenges and opportunities of participating in trade fairs among small-scale entrepreneurs in Lagos, using the Lagos International Trade Fair at TBS as a case study, with the aim of generating insights that inform policy and practical support mechanisms for MSMEs. The scope focuses on analyzing the challenges and opportunities of participating in trade fairs for small-scale entrepreneurs in Lagos, with particular emphasis on the Lagos International Trade Fair held at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS). The research examines how participation affects market visibility, customer engagement, business networking, and brand recognition for small-scale entrepreneurial ventures. It also investigates the barriers these entrepreneurs face, including financial constraints, logistical challenges, competitive pressures, and limited capacity to convert trade fair exposure into long-term business growth.

The study is geographically limited to Lagos, Nigeria, and specifically to the 2025 edition of the Lagos International Trade Fair at TBS, which attracted hundreds of MSMEs and aimed to host approximately one million visitors (Guardian Nigeria, 2025; MSME Africa, 2025). By focusing on this event, the study captures contemporary dynamics in trade fair participation and the evolving support structures for small-scale enterprises. A qualitative research approach is adopted, employing semi-structured interviews with small-scale entrepreneurs who participated in the fair, as well as discussions with fair organizers and relevant stakeholders. This methodology enables an in-depth understanding of both the opportunities and challenges experienced by participants.

In addition to event-specific insights, the study draws on scholarly literature highlighting the strategic importance of trade fairs in SME internationalization, performance, and networking (Gerschewski et al., 2020). By integrating empirical findings from the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair with established research on SME trade fair engagement, the study aims to provide practical recommendations to enhance the inclusivity, accessibility, and effectiveness of trade fairs for small-scale entrepreneurs in Lagos. The problem of this study is that the Lagos International Trade Fair, held at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS), is recognized as one of West Africa's leading platforms for commerce and enterprise development, attracting a wide range of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) for product exhibition, networking, and market engagement (TheCable, 2025). Despite this opportunity, small-scale entrepreneurs often face significant challenges in fully leveraging the benefits of participation. Reports from the 2025 fair indicate that while hundreds of MSMEs participated and the event targeted approximately one million visitors, exhibitors frequently encounter financial constraints, logistical difficulties, and limited capacity to sustain business visibility after the fair concludes (Guardian Nigeria, 2025; MSME Africa, 2025).

Academic literature further highlights that trade fairs can offer strategic benefits such as networking, market exposure, and learning from competitors, yet SMEs often struggle with operational readiness, competitive pressures, and limited follow-up capabilities, which may reduce the effectiveness of their participation (Gerschewski et al., 2020). These challenges are compounded in emerging economies where access to financing, strategic market knowledge, and institutional support may be constrained. Consequently, there is a gap in understanding how small-scale entrepreneurs in Lagos navigate these challenges while maximizing the opportunities provided by major trade events like the Lagos International Trade Fair. This study seeks to investigate these dynamics, providing insights into the barriers and enabling factors that affect SME engagement at trade fairs and offering recommendations for improving participation outcomes, policy support, and practical strategies for small-scale entrepreneurs.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to examine the challenges and opportunities faced by small-scale entrepreneurs in Lagos when participating in trade fairs, using the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square as a case study. The study objectives are:

1. To identify the opportunities available to small-scale entrepreneurs through trade fair participation.
2. To examine the challenges that hinder their full engagement and benefits.
3. To propose strategies to enhance the effectiveness of trade fair participation for small-scale entrepreneurs.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What opportunities do small-scale entrepreneurs gain from participating in the Lagos International Trade Fair?
2. What challenges limit their benefits from participation?
3. What strategies can improve trade fair participation for small-scale entrepreneurs?

This study is significant because it provides insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by small-scale entrepreneurs participating in trade fairs in Lagos, specifically the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS). The fair is one of West Africa's largest trade exhibitions, attracting thousands of local and international participants and serving as a major platform for business networking, product showcasing, and market access (Wikipedia, 2025). Participation in such events can enhance small-scale entrepreneurs' visibility, facilitate new partnerships, and provide opportunities to reach wider domestic and international markets.

Understanding the challenges entrepreneurs encounter, including financial constraints, logistical issues, and competitive pressures, is crucial for designing effective support mechanisms and policies. By highlighting both the opportunities and limitations of trade fair participation, this study can inform entrepreneurs, business associations, and policymakers on how to structure interventions that maximize benefits for small-scale businesses. Moreover, it contributes to existing knowledge on SME development in emerging economies by providing empirical evidence on how trade fairs affect small-scale business performance and market integration (NITF, 2025).

Finally, the study's findings may guide government agencies and trade fair organizers in improving planning, resources, and support for small-scale entrepreneurs, thereby increasing the inclusivity and effectiveness of trade fairs in Lagos. Insights from this research will be useful in shaping future programs, capacity-building initiatives, and policy decisions aimed at enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of small-scale enterprises.

This study is justified because small-scale entrepreneurs represent a vital segment of Lagos's informal and formal economy, yet their ability to benefit fully from participation in large trade fair platforms such as the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) remains under-explored. The Lagos International Trade Fair is recognised as one of the largest trade exhibitions in West Africa, attracting substantial numbers of exhibitors and visitors from multiple countries and sectors, and providing important opportunities for enterprise development, networking and market exposure (Lagos International Trade Fair, 2025).

Despite the scale and potential value of such fairs, evidence from trade promotion platforms suggests that small and medium enterprises often face unique challenges in fully leveraging these opportunities. For many MSMEs, constraints such as limited financial capacity, competition with larger firms, and difficulties in converting trade fair exposure into sustained business growth limit the long-term benefits of participation (Gerschewski, Evers, Nguyen, & Froese, 2020). While such dynamics have been documented in other regional contexts, there is limited empirical research focused specifically on the experiences of small-scale entrepreneurs within the Lagos trade fair environment, particularly concerning how they navigate barriers and harness opportunities for business growth.

Additionally, the renewed prominence of trade fairs in Nigeria's economic agenda exemplified by the revival of the Nigeria International Trade Fair as a national platform for exchange and enterprise development highlights the need for research that informs policy, programme design, and enterprise support strategies tailored to MSMEs (Nigeria International Trade Fair, 2025). By generating context-specific evidence, this study will help stakeholders including government agencies, business associations, and entrepreneurs themselves to better understand how to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of trade fair participation, ultimately strengthening small-scale enterprise performance and competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participation in trade fairs has been widely studied as a strategic channel through which small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can gain market exposure, build networks, and enhance business growth. Trade fairs function as business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-customer (B2C) platforms, allowing enterprises to interact with potential buyers, suppliers, and collaborators in a concentrated environment. Research on trade show participation has shown that SMEs often develop valuable networks and operational outcomes through trade events, even though the financial gains are less consistently documented (Gerschewski, Evers, Nguyen, & Froese, 2020).

The Lagos International Trade Fair, was held at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) in November 2025, represents one of the most significant trade exhibition platforms in West Africa, attracting diverse exhibitors and visitors with ambitious targets for participation and commerce. Organised by the Lagos International Trade Fair Complex Management Board, the 2025 edition was expected to draw tens of thousands of participants and provide extensive opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurs to showcase products, engage in market dialogue, and explore new business linkages.

Scholarship on trade fair participation underscores that while trade fairs offer potential opportunities such as increased visibility, networking, and market entry, they also pose challenges for SMEs, including limited resources, competition for attention, and logistical barriers (Gerschewski et al., 2020). Participation in trade fairs has been widely recognised as a key strategic activity for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) aiming to enhance market visibility, networking, and performance outcomes. Trade fairs provide a concentrated environment for firms to engage directly with potential customers, partners, and industry stakeholders, offering a platform for product demonstration, knowledge exchange, and competitive benchmarking. In empirical research, trade shows are identified as a significant venue where SMEs build valuable networks that influence operational performance, particularly for firms that are proactive in relationship development and market engagement (Gerschewski, Evers, Nguyen, & Froese, 2020).

The Lagos International Trade Fair represents one of West Africa's most significant trade exhibition platforms and has been repositioned under the *Nigeria International Trade Fair (NITF) 2025* banner, organised by the Lagos International Trade Fair Complex Management Board. The 2025 edition was scheduled to run from November 21 to November 30 and was designed to provide a comprehensive platform for commerce, enterprise development, and international exchange, welcoming local and global stakeholders for innovation and market linkages.

Before the fair began, organisers aimed for substantial participation: the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry projected the 39th annual edition at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) would attract at least one million visitors and thousands of exhibitors, including specialised segments such as children's corners, tech hubs, and international partner exhibitions, which underscores the fair's potential opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurs seeking exposure and engagement.

Government support and enabling policy commitments have also been highlighted as part of the trade fair's ecosystem. Authorities reiterated the importance of providing an enabling environment for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), emphasising infrastructure, streamlined business processes, and structural supports that can enhance the capacity of small business participants to leverage trade fair participation effectively. While trade fairs offer distinct opportunities for visibility and networking, the literature also suggests SMEs often face cost, resource, and competitive challenges, though most of this research originates from broader contexts rather than Nigeria specifically (Gerschewski et al., 2020). Continued empirical investigation within local contexts, such as Lagos's trade fair environment, is therefore critical to understanding how small-scale entrepreneurs can effectively realise opportunities and address constraints in these large-scale trade platforms.



Figure 1.0: Showing the entrepreneurs stand at the tradefair event with the researchers

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2025



Figure 2.0: Showing the entrepreneurs stand at the tradefair event

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2025



Figure 3.0: Showing the entrepreneurs stand at the tradefair event

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2025



Figure 4.0: Showing the entrepreneurs stand at the tradefair event

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2025

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges and opportunities experienced by small-scale entrepreneurs participating in the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring subjective experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors, allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants' realities (Omeihe & Harrison, 2024). Unlike quantitative approaches, which measure variables numerically, qualitative research provides rich insights into the nuanced ways in which small-scale entrepreneurs navigate trade fair participation, including operational, financial, and strategic challenges (Myers, 2025).

A case study approach was employed, focusing exclusively on the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square. The case study method enables an in-depth exploration of a specific event or phenomenon within its real-world context, which is particularly relevant for understanding the complex interplay of factors influencing small-scale entrepreneurs' engagement (Myers, 2025). By concentrating on this single fair, the study captures both the opportunities available to participants and the constraints they face, providing a comprehensive picture of the trade fair environment in Lagos.

The population for this study comprises small-scale entrepreneurs who participated in the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair, representing various sectors including fashion, food, technology, and crafts.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct experience and knowledge of the fair. This method ensures that the data collected are relevant and insightful, as participants have direct exposure to the opportunities and challenges of trade fair participation. Purposive sampling is widely recognised in qualitative research as a practical approach for selecting knowledgeable participants who can provide detailed information (Omeihe & Harrison, 2024).

Data were collected through focus group discussions, which allowed for interactive exploration of shared experiences among participants. Focus groups enable the researcher to capture both individual and collective perspectives, revealing patterns in the challenges and strategies of small-scale entrepreneurs (Myers, 2025). This approach facilitates rich, context-specific insights that would be difficult to obtain through other methods.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic approach to identifying, coding, and organising patterns or themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allows for the extraction of key insights regarding the opportunities and challenges experienced by participants, while also highlighting commonalities and divergences across different sectors. This method is highly suitable for qualitative research in business studies, as it provides a structured framework for synthesising complex experiential data (Myers, 2025).

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided consent prior to participation. Ethical compliance ensured that participants could freely share their experiences without fear of exposure or negative consequences, upholding the integrity and credibility of the research

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this case study on the Nigeria International Trade Fair (NITF) 2025 at the Lagos International Trade Fair Complex highlight a mix of *opportunities* and *challenges* for small-scale entrepreneurs engaging in large trade fair events.

Opportunities for Small-Scale Entrepreneurs

One of the primary opportunities identified is *enhanced market exposure and networking*. The 2025 NITF was widely publicised as a key platform for commerce, innovation, and enterprise development, drawing local and international participants from diverse sectors to Lagos. This visibility can help small-scale entrepreneurs connect with buyers, investors, suppliers, and other business stakeholders (Nigeria International Trade Fair, 2025). Participation in large trade fairs also allows small-scale enterprises to engage in B2B and B2G interactions, which can lead to partnerships, collaborations, and access to new markets. This was emphasised by organisers and stakeholders who positioned the 2025 edition as more than just a commercial exhibition, but a platform for *dialogue on enterprise growth, investment, and digital trade transformation* (P.M. News, 2025).

Furthermore, government support and enabling environments significantly contribute to the opportunities available. The Lagos State Government reiterated its commitment to strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem and supporting MSMEs through infrastructure, policy initiatives, and inclusion in largescale events such as trade fairs (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2025).

Challenges Limiting Small-Scale Entrepreneurs

Despite these opportunities, several challenges constrain the benefits for small-scale entrepreneurs. While specific academic studies on Nigerian SMEs at trade fairs remain limited, *regional studies on trade fair challenges* suggest that resource limitations, competition, and operational capacity issues often hinder smaller enterprises from fully leveraging trade showcases (Abdullah & Jianhua, 2017). Cost barriers associated with participation including exhibition fees, logistics, booth setup, and promotional expenses remain a systemic hurdle for resource-constrained small businesses. Such financial burdens can reduce the likelihood of sustained engagement or follow-through on business leads generated during the fair. Although direct quantitative data for NITF participants is not yet public, broad evidence from similar contexts indicates these costs disproportionately affect small enterprises.

Operational readiness and capacity to compete alongside larger firms are additional challenges. Effective participation requires strategic planning, marketing expertise, and capacity to negotiate deals capabilities that many small entrepreneurs may not fully possess without targeted support and training.

This echoes general findings in trade fair literature that *SMEs struggle with competitive and strategic engagement* even when visibility and networking opportunities are available.

Synthesis of Insights

Taken together, these results illustrate that trade fairs such as NITF 2025 can be valuable avenues for small-scale entrepreneurs to gain exposure, develop networks, and engage in broader business ecosystems. However, realising these benefits fully often depends on overcoming financial, operational, and capacity constraints. Policymakers, fair organisers, and business support institutions should therefore explore targeted interventions such as subsidised participation, capacity building, and matchmaking programmes to ensure more inclusive participation outcomes for small-scale enterprises.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges and opportunities faced by small-scale entrepreneurs participating in the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square. The findings indicate that trade fairs provide significant opportunities for market exposure, networking, and potential business partnerships, enabling entrepreneurs to showcase their products and engage with both domestic and international stakeholders (Nigeria International Trade Fair, 2025; P.M. News, 2025). Government support and institutional initiatives were also found to enhance these opportunities, creating a more enabling environment for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to participate effectively (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2025).

Despite these benefits, small-scale entrepreneurs face substantial challenges, including financial constraints, competition from larger firms, and limited operational or strategic capacity. These challenges can restrict the ability of entrepreneurs to fully capitalise on trade fair participation and convert short-term visibility into long-term business growth (Abdullah & Jianhua, 2017).

The study highlights that while trade fairs are valuable platforms for SMEs, policy interventions, targeted support, and capacity-building programmes are necessary to ensure equitable participation and sustainable outcomes. Subsidised participation, entrepreneurship training, and post-event engagement initiatives can enhance the ability of small-scale entrepreneurs to navigate challenges and maximise the benefits of trade fairs. In conclusion, the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square represents a critical opportunity for entrepreneurship development in Nigeria, but realising its full potential for small-scale entrepreneurs requires strategic support, capacity building, and inclusive policies. The study underscores the need for continued research and monitoring to develop effective mechanisms that support SMEs in leveraging trade fairs as a driver for growth, innovation, and economic inclusion.

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