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An exploration of contextual factors affecting the nexus of competitive strategy and human resource management practices in Nigeria emerging economy context

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing calls for context-specific and practice-based strategic human resource management research in emerging economies, to date there have been limited empirical studies on Nigeria, one of Africa's largest economies and a newly emerging economy experiencing strong economic development, rapid industrialisation, and integration into global markets. This study explores the moderating influence of contextual factors on the nexus of competitive strategy (CS) and human resource management practices (HRMPs) in Nigeria. We employ the social and comparative institutional theories to address the moderating influence of the contextual factors on the CS–HRMP nexus using a qualitative research approach. Data were collected from thirty human resource management professionals and top management across medium-sized enterprises in Nigeria via semi-structured interviews. The resulting data were analysed through thematic analysis. We establish six main contextual factors— culture and value system, religion, ethnicity and linguistic affinity, economic factors, politics and governmental policies, and quality of education and low-skilled workforce—and the processes through which these factors influence the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria.

Introduction

This study explores the contextual factors affecting the nexus of competitive strategy (CS) and human resource management practices (HRMPs) in Nigeria's emerging economy context. A significant and persistently re-occurring issue in the strategic human resource management (SHRM) literature is the relationship between CS and HRMPs

(Beer et al., 1984; Cascio & Boudreau, 2012; Hendry & Pettigrew, 1990; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009; Paauwe et al., 2013; Schuler & Jackson, 1987). The CS–HRM architecture (HRM strategies policies, practices, processes, and programmes) is central to the SHRM literature on developed economies, being explored from various contextual and theoretical perspectives (Bendickson et al., 2013; Budhwar, 2000; Hendry & Pettigrew, 1990; Paauwe et al., 2013; Wright & Ulrich, 2017).

Rational theory represents an important theoretical approach for developing CS–HRMP linkage, emphasising the clear formalisation of SHRM processes in organisational settings (Adeleye, 2011). Moreover, rational theory accentuates the value-added perspective of formalised processes in critically developing consistent relationships between HRM architecture and the various strategic levels. The rational theoretical approach to strategic formulation, often referred to as the prescriptive approach to strategy is defined as 'deliberate approach to strategy-making is associated with a well-defined process of formulation, implementation and evaluation' (Maritz et al., 2011, p. 104). Through rational theoretical approach, achieving an optimal CS–HRMP relationship requires a planned approach that examines the organisational context, business strategy and available resources. Despite offering theoretical insight into the strategic CS–HRMP relationship, rational theory typically minimises the influence of emergent contextual factors and a volatile business environment on strategy formulation and implementation. Consequently, recent studies (Adeleye, 2011; Hillebrand et al., 2011) suggest strong consideration of core contextual factors (e.g. informal and formal institutional factors) in developing CS–HRMP linkage. Social and comparative institutional theories are increasingly adopted in African HRM research. This study therefore adopts such theories to investigate the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria.

This study focuses on Nigeria as one of the newly emerging global economies. Emerging economies denote a transition from average low-income to a major concentration of middle-income earners with increasing economic growth, investment, quality of life, and foreign direct investment (Gok & Gok, 2016). The key characteristics of emerging economies are their investment capacity, volatile economic environment, institutional strength, educational systems, fertility and mortality rates, sophistication of business operations, rising GDP, urbanisation and infrastructure, demography, productivity rates, and institutional corruption (Gok & Gok, 2016; Pandit et al., 2018; Venkateswaran & Ojha, 2017). Emerging economies' distinct volatility is well documented (Aguiar & Gopinath, 2007; Cumming & Zhang, 2016), arising from internal and external factors including natural disasters and price shock on essential exports. The key differences of emerging and developing economies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences between developing and emerging economies (Grewal et al., 2015, p. 205).

Aggregate features	Specific characteristics	Emerging economies (markets)	Developed economies (markets)
Aggregate-level market differences	Population	Larger population	Smaller population
	GDP growth	Fast growing	Slower growth rate
	Income disparity	Large income disparity (heterogeneous)	Largely homogenous income (heavily revolve middle income earners)
Individual consumer differences	Price sensitivity	Relatively High	Relatively Low
	Brand Importance	Very high	Relatively low
	Social norms	Collectivist	Individualist
	Age	Younger Consumers	Ageing population
Institutional environment differences	Legal system	Evolving	Stable
	Political environment	Volatile	Transparent/Democratic
	Hard infrastructure	Poor infrastructure	Well-developed infrastructure
Business context differences	B2B relationships	Large number of informal B2B relationships	Formal contractual B2B relationships
	Labour and skills	Relatively low	Relatively high
	B2G relationships	Strong influence	Weak influence

From Table 1, the aggregate market and institutional differences are quite significant in understanding the nature of context-specific influences in emerging economies' HRMPs.

HRM research in African and emerging economy contexts such as Nigeria is increasingly attracting academic interest. In particular, studies on SHRM adoption in Africa (Anibaba & Adeleye, 2014; Darty-Baah, 2013; Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2016) suggest unique theoretical, conceptual, epistemological, cultural, and institutional practices. Clearly, HRM adoption in the post-colonial African era developed through the legacy of colonial–industrial policies (Ayentimi et al., 2018; Dibben et al., 2017; Harvey, 2002). However, the real movement to indigenise personnel development in Africa received strong momentum in the early 1980s and late 1990s, with radical change in management practice and the role of trade unions (Harvey, 2002). Subsequently, the applicability of western management and HRM models in the African context has been subject to scholarly and academic debate (Adeleye, 2011). Some researchers suggest that a blend of African values and western management theories underpin business decisions in Africa (Horwitz, 2017; Horwitz & Budhwar, 2016; Idemudia & Amaeshi, 2019). Consequently, HRM in Africa shows universal convergent and locally divergent elements in developing suitable practices that are valuable to the African context. Notably, national factors such as cultural and institutional factors determine the nature and rationale for the choice of HRMPs adopted in emerging economies. The insufficient unitary perspective on HRM theory in Africa, partly due to substantive divergence with western practices, and complications arising from the African context, has led some authors (Jackson, 2015; Wood & Bischoff, 2022) to suggest studying African HRM through the lens of cross-cultural, comparative institutional and global value chain theories.

Specifically, studying HRM in Nigeria unearths the nature of reality as perceived in the Nigerian context. For example, Nigerians comprehend the world and reality's intricate nature through social relationships at home and in the workplace (Chiluwa, 2010; Okpilike, 2012). Further, workplace events are typically interpreted through religion (Adogame, 2010), with spirituality and religious sentiments often expressed and God (Muslim, Christian or traditional) influencing the decisions and events that manifest (Adogame, 2010; Anibaba & Adeleye, 2014). From a cultural worldview perspective, meaning renders the conceptual appropriateness and significance of western management expressions difficult to apply in cultures informed by deep-rooted social relationships (Kamoche, 1997).

Despite these fundamental epistemological, conceptual, cultural, and institutional features being shared by most African countries, they differ through the peculiarities of colonial influence and the existence of natural resources, as well as differing economic development, political stability and influence, linguistics, geographical location, and levels of interaction with western nations. Thus, there is the need for context-specific study of the effects of contextual factors on the nexus of CS and HRMP in emerging countries. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the contextual factors affecting the CS–HRMP nexus in an African emerging economy (i.e. Nigeria), exploring the CS and HRMP options adopted, and how the contextual factors affect the CS–HRMP nexus in this context.

Our study makes several contributions. First, to our knowledge, this is the first empirical study on the contextual factors affecting the nexus of CS and HRMP, which adds nuance to our understanding of the specific contextual factors that impact on the linkage between CS and HRMPs in the newly emerging economy context. Second, it fills a gap in the African SHRM theories and practice in line with recent recommendations, insights and calls for further studies on indigenous and tribal impacts on management (Ikyanyon et al., 2020; Kaufman, 2015, Nwachukwu et al., 2015) and the *Journal of African Management*'s special issue call in 2020. Third, this study challenges the taken-for-granted assumption of focusing on SHRM research on organisational performance as a positive approach for organisation development, and redirects it towards identifying the indigenous context-specific factors that moderate the nexus of SHRM and influence organisational development, growth, and performance. Fourth, it demonstrates the strong role of socio-cultural and religious knowledge factors that influence the extent of the linkage between CS and HRMP development. Finally, the study provides a theoretical framework that forms a foundation for further empirical research that investigates a broader range of the principal components of African

institutions and cultures that moderate the establishment and application of strategic HRMPs.

Impact of the Nigeria context on the CS–HRMP nexus

The CS–HRMP linkage has remained a key issue of concern in SHRM over the past three decades. Otherwise referred to as 'linkage', 'integration' or 'connection', the CS–HRMP relationship involves unique consideration of the strategies and HRMPs at the formulation, implementation, and evaluation stages. Previous studies examined the CS–HRMP linkage from different perspectives, establishing HRM theory support for CS (Abang, 2009; Arshad et al., 2014; Nwachukwu et al., 2015) and exploring the link between CS and individual HRMPs (Bae & Lawler, 2000; Schuler & Jackson, 1987). Then, Jhajharia and Kaur (2015) investigated the business–HRM strategy fit to understand the implications of the organisational strategy–HRM linkage. Although early SHRM models—Matching, Warwick, and Harvard—established a relationship between the overall HRM architecture and organisational strategy, identifying western contextual factors impacting the linkage (Beer et al., 1984; Hendry & Pettigrew, 1986), recent studies (Edgar et al., 2018; Malik et al., 2017) have renewed emphasis on how context impacts the development and implementation of human resource (HR) architecture aspects. Oppong (2018) noted that a major problem faced by organisations is the pressure of applying universal HRMPs while adhering to the local requirements and practices. This clarifies the concerns of previous studies (Chew & Horwitz, 2004; Kamoche, 1996), which suggested inherent conflict in the adaptive responsiveness of multi-national corporations to the local context, and in Kamoche's (1996, p. 231) terms represented an 'integration–differentiation conundrum.' Nevertheless, Mesquita et al. (2015) found that emotional constituents are assembled in context-specific ways that result in systematic cultural differences. Other interesting findings in India (Malik et al., 2017) emphasised the context–HRM relationship in driving organisational ambidexterity. Further, in developing a contextual SHRM framework, Farndale and Paauwe (2018) substantiated the general agreement that the iterative process involving context and an SHRM system is important in developing a dynamic fit across HRMPs and organisational processes. When considered in the light of the contextual approach to SHRM studies in Nigeria, context is important in developing an understanding of the relationship between CS and HRMP. For example, Ikyanyon et al. (2020) conducted an analysis of Nigerian practices based on institutional theory and found a unique approach to HRM and legislation.

Nigeria has one of the largest economies in Africa, with a population exceeding 200 million. The country features prominently in current

depictions of 'emerging Africa', owing to its resources and potential as a West African hub. Since returning to democracy in 1999, the country has witnessed significant economic and some political reforms that, along with a rising demand for its natural resources, helped ignite unprecedented economic growth of almost 7% during the 2001–2011 period. However, despite these natural resources and political and economic advances, Nigeria faces serious social, economic, and political challenges owing to the predominance of private interests in government and many public institutions. Considering the daily issues of rising poverty, insecurity and corruption that confront the country, as well as other attributes typical of emerging nations, sustaining Nigeria's emerging market/economic status presents challenges.

Specific contexts impact the strategic formulation of HRMPs and their linkage with CS. The Nigeria context of businesses is epistemologically, conceptually, culturally, and institutionally peculiar and unique. Hence, the applicability of western SHRM models is a source of debate (Kamoche, 1997; Webster et al., 2006). To understand how Nigerians make sense of the world around them, we need to consider the influence of their social relationships outside the workplace, where family is fundamental, and transpose this into the workplace (Kamoche, 1997; Webster et al., 2006). Generally, Nigerians interpret workplace events through religious meaning (Adogame, 2010). Therefore, spirituality and religious emotions are often expressed through allusions to God from a Muslim, Christian or traditional perspective (Adogame, 2010). Moreover, Nigerians evolve concepts and meaning through their cultural worldview, which could render the conceptual appropriateness and meaningfulness of western management expressions difficult to harmonise in a culture informed by deep-rooted social relationships.

Nigerian political and economic systems have challenged the survival and growth of small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), with issues including the unwillingness of commercial banks to grant credit; poor managerial skills of entrepreneurs; weak infrastructural (e.g. roads, electricity, and water supply); ongoing political and ethno-religious conflict; multiple taxation and insecure foreign exchange; and corruption and unfavourable government policies (Etuk et al., 2014; Osotimehin et al., 2012). Additionally, the threat of political shifts and changes to state-owned enterprises, coupled with chaotic legal stipulations, influence Nigerian organisations' distinctive management approach.

Regarding the Nigerian workplace and people management, socio-cultural diversity has a considerable influence on the choice of HRMPs and CS (Fajana et al., 2011; Fajana & Ige, 2009; Owoyemi et al., 2011). Culture, language, religion, and gender differences are identified as key factors considered in the acquisition and utilisation of employees

(Owoyemi et al., 2011). Moreover, Nigeria's power distance is quite evident in the literature (Owoyemi et al., 2011). The foundation of Nigerian culture is a deep-seated family orientation that is translated into workplace affiliations. For Nigerians, the family is fundamental. Hence, the basis of Nigeria's high-contact culture, friendship and love is correlated with the extent of greetings (Wayar, 2015).

The notion of seniority is well-embedded in Nigerian culture, while respect for elders, age and status means that employees often avoid expressing disagreement with their managers' opinions (Owoyemi et al., 2011). Moreover, the prevailing masculinity of Nigerian culture dominates the locus of control and dimensions of work, having an enduring effect on the work models and approach to people management in Nigerian organisations (Adegboye, 2013).

The availability of skilled labour is an issue for Nigerian organisations. This is caused in part by the educational system, which is not only of perceived low quality (Owoyemi et al., 2011) but also impedes the supply of a strategic employment pool. Due to the educational structure, organised in a 6-3-3-4 system of years in primary, junior secondary, senior secondary and tertiary education, Nigerian students graduate at an average age of 25–28 years (NBS., 2016). Thus, it is older entrants that join the job market (Owoyemi et al., 2011). Due to the high graduation age and lack of employment opportunities, there is a concentration of unemployed aged 15–34 years. Furthermore, the educational system is riddled with incessant national action by university staff unions, thereby orchestrating a negative impact on student learning.

Another issue relating to the Nigeria context of people management is the role and function of the labour union. Problems with the Nigerian Labour Union (NLU) escalated during the early 1990s, with abrogation of employees' collective bargaining rights by the military government (Yehuda, 2006). Following the introduction of a new government in 1997, the bargaining rights were restored. However, ongoing issues relate to the lack of harmonised collective bargaining rights and contracts by the major organisations that constitute the NLU. Akeem (2014) highlighted the NLU's struggle with the government's neo-liberal policies regarding business in Nigeria.

The above-discussed factors of the Nigeria context render the people-management approaches and policies distinct, thus requiring an appropriate model for Nigerian enterprises that takes these factors into consideration. Given the position of medium-sized enterprises (MSEs) in the Nigerian economy, they represent the focus of this study. Previous studies (Adanlawo et al., 2021) have identified the contribution of MSEs in Nigeria to increased employment and people's welfare. Additionally, MSEs in Nigeria exhibit a more formalised approach to strategy

(Nwachukwu et al., 2015; Nyangara, 2005) in contrast to small businesses, which offers unique perspectives to studying the nexus of CS and HRMP in the MSEs sector.

In the Nigeria context, SHRM has received increased focus from researchers over the past decade. Initial studies (Fajana et al., 2011; Sani, 2012) examined the impact of SHRM on organisational performance (Adelekan et al., 2019; Eze & Daniel, 2020; Okoli & Okeke, 2018). However, the focus has also started to shift towards evaluating contextual factors' impact on SHRM theory and approach (Ikyanyon et al., 2020) including government policies, trade unions, education, corruption, tribalism, ethnicity, and skills shortages. Overall, the examination of contextual factors affecting HRMPs in Nigeria has rarely addressed their implications for the CS–HRMP nexus. Ikyanyon et al. (2020), for example, explored the influence of institutional mechanisms on HRM in the public and private sectors by applying the theoretical business systems approach to identify certain context-specific factors of HRM in Nigeria. Furthermore, previous studies (e.g. Ikyanyon et al., 2020) exploring the contextual factors impacting the choice of HRMPs have largely omitted a differentiation of the formal and informal institutions as elements of context-specific factors in the consideration of the relationship between the strategic content of organisations and the HRMP options.

Regarding the CS adopted in the Nigeria context, previous studies (e.g. Uchegbulam et al., 2015) on SMEs identified a range of CSs in use such as product quality and customisation. Chijioke (2016) found that key strategies used by SMEs to sustain their competitiveness include meeting the needs of customers at relatively low cost, also referred to as 'cost leadership' (Eniola & Ektebang, 2015). Kowo et al. (2018) conducted a study on the impact of CS on SMEs' performance in Nigeria, and identified the key strategies employed that include cost leadership and product differentiation, thus ensuring that the organisations respond to the ever-evolving needs of the customers. Ifekwem and Adedamola (2016) explored the survival of SMEs in Nigeria's Lagos state, where their findings showed the use of differentiation, market focus, and cost leadership. Eniola and Ektebang (2015) conducted a study of the CSs utilised in Nigerian SMEs and noted the adoption of a resource-based view (RBV), specifically with reference to managerial experience and staff willingness to utilise their skills to drive organisational success. Similarly, some authors (Gbadegeshin et al., 2018; Okundaye et al., 2019) identified information and communication technology (ICT) as a CS for SMEs to achieve competitive advantage in Nigeria. In some Nigerian SMEs, business-to-business (B2B) relationships using the e-commerce framework have been adopted as an avenue to drive growth and gain competitive advantage (Ekanem & Abiade, 2016).

Much has been written about the HRMPs adopted in the Nigeria context, which acknowledges that similar concepts are used to refer to the practices in Nigeria as those of the western world (Fajana et al., 2011). However, there is clear understanding among researchers (Azolukwam & Perkins, 2009; Hack-Polay et al., 2020) that although the concepts are similar, the manner of application and the nature of practice are moderated by the specific contexts of place and time. Fajana et al. (2011, p. 39) underscored that due to the colonial and post-colonial influence on people-management practices in Nigeria, there is evidence of a blend of 'transplanted and indigenous' approaches to managing people in organisations. In the light of this study (Fajana et al., 2011), networks of personal and family relationships that mirror the cultural disposition of the Nigerian society therefore exert a heavy influence on the people-management practices adopted. Based on selected authors (Anakwe, 2002; Orga & Ogbo, 2012; Fajana et al., 2011; Gadi & Hung, 2018; Ikyanyon et al., 2020; Nwachukwu & Chladkova, 2017; Tabiu et al., 2016), popular practices adopted in Nigerian SMEs include selective recruitment, performance appraisal, wage structure and reward, training, promotion, transfer and staff separation, job rotation, maintenance, HR planning, and career development practices, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 presents a summary of the main contextual factors, CS and HRMPs as the conceptual framework through which this study explores the CS–HRMP nexus. The framework demonstrates the lack of available studies that have established a nexus between CS and HRMP in MSEs in Nigeria, and the contextual factors affecting the linkage.
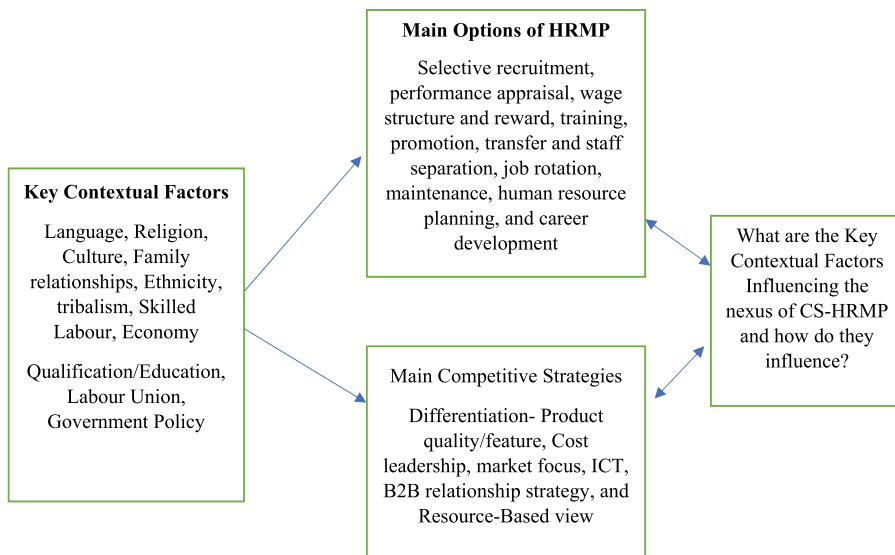

Figure 1. Conceptual framework emerging from the literature as the background for this study.

Social and comparative institutional theoretical approach to the CS–HRMP nexus

To address the question of what and how contextual factors affect the CS–HRMP nexus, we adopted social and comparative institutional theories as a foundation for exploring the influence of the contextual factors on the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria's emerging economy. Whereas social institutional theory builds on social structures and reform/change stories (Vargas-Hernandez et al., 2014), comparative institutional theory addresses the interaction between context-specific factors and HRM, especially when considering colonisation's prevailing influence on Nigeria's HRMPs (Hotho & Saka-Helmhout, 2017).

This study draws on the two strands of institutional theory, namely, comparative and social institutional theories (Aksom et al., 2020; Glover et al., 2014; Vargas-Hernandez et al., 2014), to explore the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria. Whereas comparative institutional theory recognises the interdependence between organisations and the institutions within the society in which they operate (Gooderham et al., 2019), the appropriation of social institutional theory advances the influence of social structures and reform/change stories on the organisational choices (Vargas-Hernandez et al., 2014). We argue that social and comparative institutional theories are particularly significant because they not only incorporate elements of the approaches to business and societal systems, but also focus on providing clarity regarding Nigeria's societal and institutional systems including culture, religion, low-skilled workforce and educational system, economy, government policy, ethnic and linguistic affinity.

Three main characteristics make the social and comparative institutional lens suitable for this study. First, social and comparative institutional theories focus on societal institutions at the formal and informal level, which aptly considers a nation's political systems with its historical development, economic, social, and educational systems that influence robust decision-taking within organisations (Dessler et al., 2007; Zhai & Su, 2019). Nigeria's institutional arrangements such as political, economic, and educational systems are heavily influenced by colonial and post-colonial structures. Harvey (2002) surmised that western HR managers without adequate information regarding the complex cultural and social nature of Sub-Saharan countries applied a range of western HRM policies within the African context. This particularly aligns with the views of Kamoche (1997), which highlight the tendency of African HR managers to follow the example of western managers of state-owned enterprises by constantly consulting public officials prior to making SHRM decisions. In its western form, HRM in Nigeria was identified in the literature (Fajana et al., 2011) as a concept introduced in the 1940s during the period of colonialism through industrialisation and

commercialisation, which later transformed to become wage management. Following the post-colonial era, Nigerian HRM retained its colonial legacy with an indigenous element termed 'hybridisation' by Azolukwam and Perkins (2009). In its current form, HRM in Nigeria has remained a constant struggle to balance western and indigenous models of people management practices (Amaugo, 2016).

Second, the theories focus on the link between organisations and their societal impact. Comparative institutional theory suggests that an organisation's context of operation impacts key decisions in resource management and utilisation, while societal differences influenced by the religion, culture, ethnic and linguistic affinity in relevant institutions impact on an organisation's ability to attract and select the optimum candidates, develop favourable working conditions, and establish internal relations (Aksom et al., 2020; Glover et al., 2014). Consequently, due to differences in societal institutions and systems, organisations in different locations and countries evolve and adopt specific strategies (Cole, 2013). Third, social, and comparative institutional theory recognise the institutional linkage, as a formal national institution cannot exist without corresponding reliance on other institutions. Consequently, institutions are given strong conceptualisation in relation to others, thereby highlighting their mutual interdependence. The political system is thus not divorced from economic, social, and educational systems. The viability and stability of one institution impact on that of others, whereby one institution's growth stimulates the growth of others, and vice versa. Importantly, Nigeria's governmental policies serve to stimulate and influence key institutions within the country that have a strategic impact on an organisation's decisions and choices.

In considering Nigerian institutions and their influence on management decisions and practices in emerging economies, from the perspective of social and comparative institutional theories it is important to explore the key understanding of strong and weak institutions, which are determined to the extent that within the economic–political arena the state enforces its legal systems and ensures the durability of its institutions (Uzonwanne, 2012). Alhassan and Kilishi (2019) identified variations in institutional strengths among a range of countries. Although providing a broad regional or continental classification regarding which countries have weak or strong institutions is challenging (Alhassan & Kilishi, 2019), it is generally accepted that emerging economies such as Nigeria exhibit signs of weak institutions (Carlsson, 2017). The influence of institutional strength on management practices and HRM application is wide ranging (Ikyanyon et al., 2020). Moreover, research (Carlsson, 2017; Fuentelsaz et al., 2020) found that the strength of national institutions impacts on the internationalisation of management practices and

trading attitudes. This is particularly true of the African context, where Alhassan and Kilishi (2019) explored the perennially weakened institutions of states and found political, economic, and cultural impacts. Specifically, Uzonwanne (2012) conducted an exploratory study that sheds light on the weak social and political institutions of Nigeria that significantly undermined political and governmental policies, ethnic and national development, and economic and financial growth.

From the perspectives of social and comparative institutionalism, this study does not perceive culture as a residual element in explaining what cannot be accounted for by institutional structures (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015). Culture is hereby treated as a schema with high potential for reproduction in institutions. Culture and institutions (social and comparative institutionalism) are logically and mutually related in a feedback effect, where both mutually coevolve and influence management practice (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015).

Methods

To respond to the research question of what and how contextual factors affect the CS–HRMP nexus, we employed a qualitative research approach to study the MSEs in Nigeria using a multiple case study of nineteen companies (see Table 3). MSEs are defined in Nigeria as enterprises having 50–199 employees and/or with sufficient financial turnover (₦50–200 million). SMEs in Nigeria contribute 49.8% of national GDP, which accounts for 96% of businesses and approximately 84% of employment (SMEDAN. , 2017), representing the driving force for economic growth (Okpara, 2015). In this study, we selected MSEs were more likely to have sufficiently documented CS and HRMPs to provide the data required for the study, unlike small enterprises that typically do not document their strategies.

Specifically, we delineated objectives to identify the types of CS and HRMP options adopted for the nexus, and how the contextual factors influence the CS–HRMP nexus in MSEs in Nigeria. Due to the limited extant literature and research on how contextual factors affect the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria, the qualitative approach enabled deep insights into the participants' experiences regarding the manner in which meanings are shaped through culture and behaviour in this specific setting (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As an

Table 2. Table of respondents' category.

Respondent category	Numbers
Top Management	15
Human Resource professionals	15
Total	30

Table 3. Table of cases and participants.

Respondents	Company	Years in position	Overall years of work experience	Industry/sector
R1 (Managing Director)	Company 1	15	22	Petrol/Gas
R26 (Management Board	Company 1	19	22	Oil/Petroleum Sector
R2 (Managing Director)	Company 2	7	24	Education
R20 (Administrative – admin - officer)	Company 2	8	12	Education
R7 (HR Administrator)	Company 3	8	13	Construction
R4 (Managing Director)	Company 3	8	18	Construction
R5 (Managing Director)	Company 4	6	15	Health Sector
R10 (HR Coordinator)	Company 4	9	12	Health Sector
R6 (HR Professional)	Company 5	11	18	IT/Information
R8 (HR Officer)	Company 6	4	6	Events Management/hospitality
R21 (Admin officer)	Company 6	4	7	Hospitality/Hotels
R9 (HR Manager)	Company 8	6	9	Media/Information
R11 (Member, Management Board)	Company 9	7	10	Manufacturing
R12 (Management Board)	Company 9	3	4	Production/manufacturing
R13 (Management Board)	Company 10	5	5	Logistics/Transport/freight
R30 (Admin officer)	Company 10	4	12	Logistics/transport
R19 (HR coordinator)	Company 11	6	10	Trading/Supermarkets
R14 (Management Board)	Company 11	4	8	Trading/Supermarkets
R15 (HR coordinator)	Company 12	12	15	Banking/Financial Services
R17 (HR coordinator)	Company 13	1	3	Fashion/Beautician
R18 (HR officer)	Company 14	5	6	Legal
R29 (HR Officer)	Company 14	3	4	Legal
R3 (Business Owner)	Company 15	2	18	Education
R27 (Managing Director)	Company 15	3	10	Education
R24 (Managing Director)	Company 16	6	13	Health
R23 (Managing Director)	Company 16	11	21	Health
R16 (HR)	Company 17	1	2	Hospitality/Tourism
R22 (Admin officer)	Company 17	2	2	Trading/Supermarkets
R25 (Managing Director)	Company 18	7	9	Insurance
R28 (HR Manager)	Company 19	9	17	Public/Government

interdisciplinary approach that encompasses a wider range of epistemological viewpoints, the qualitative methodology facilitated the identification of culture- and value-based contextual factors within this specific setting, and their influence on the integration of CS and HRMPs (McNamara, 2001).

We conducted an exploratory qualitative study using nineteen MSE case studies in Nigeria. The case study approach was suitable for the study due to the limited empirical studies on the contextual factors influencing the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria businesses with sufficiently documented strategies. Thus, the collection, analysis and presentation of rich empirical data were facilitated (Creswell, 2015). Moreover, we adopted the case study as it enables the study of a contemporary and novel phenomenon (Yin, 2009), with multiple cases providing rich data to seek similarities and differences, while allowing a broader discovery of theoretical evolution to develop robust and valid theory (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009).

This study adopted non-probability purposive sampling (Ridolfo & Schoua-Glusberg, 2011) to enable the selection of cases likely to generate those factors that influence the nexus of SHRM practices in MSEs (Table 2).

Although the cases were selected purposively, the number of participants were not predetermined from the onset of the interviews until data saturation. The sample consisted of HR professionals and top management performing HR and strategy duties (see Table 3 for a summary of the respondents' companies, roles and demographics). We also ensured a rich diversity in terms of the current professional role and years of employment. It was particularly important to select the participants due to their organisational position, which would provide them with insight into the strategic content and HRMPs. The participants were selected using the following inclusion criteria: their current role, with a minimum of one year's experience in that role.

Data collection

The researchers worked in collaboration with the SME development agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) as part of a broader research project to identify the registered the MSEs in Nigeria, along with their addresses and phone contacts. Prior ethical approval was granted as part of the research project. The researchers enlisted the assistance of SMEDAN zonal coordinators to formally contact MSEs in Nigeria and seek the wilful and voluntary participation of the organisations' HR professionals and top management. Nineteen companies were purposively chosen based on the size of the organisation, availability of the target professionals, and the formalised strategic content of the organisation. In twelve of the companies, both the HR professionals and top management were selected for interview, whilst in the other seven companies either an HR professional or a top management was specifically nominated by the participating company to be interviewed. The researchers were informed to direct further queries or follow-up discussion to the nominated individual within the company. Following the initial discussion and obtainment of consent, interview dates and times were arranged with the participants, with each interview lasting approximately ninety minutes.

We employed semi-structured interviews due to their strength when gathering in-depth data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). An interview protocol was derived from the literature on the main areas of contextual factors and impacts, featuring topics and questions that covered personal experiences in terms of involvement with HRM, and organisational strategies focusing on the CS and HRMPs employed by the MSEs. The questions sought insight into contextual factors across the main sectors of MSEs in Nigeria, and particularly institutional factors such as culture, values, regulations, policies, macroenvironment, religion, language, and their influence on the integration of CS and HRMPs (e.g. perceptions, shared

meanings, conceptualisations, and policies). All the participants were asked the same questions, which allowed for further probing; however, based on their professional role, further probing was also initiated to explore specific responses (See appendix 4 for sample interview questions). Data saturation was reached by the 28th participant. To ensure that data has reached saturation point, the researchers conducted another two interviews (29th and 30th) which they found necessary to firmly conclude that there is no new emerging information in the data collection. The data were recorded using an audio recording device, and then transcribed. The interview participants were selected due to their access to information necessary to help develop an understanding of HR practices and CS within the participating companies.

Data analysis

The recorded data were transcribed and thematically analysed to identify the key themes that depicted the choice of CS, the HRMP options and the key contextual factors. Although thematic analysis is applicable across other methods of qualitative analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), the analytical method has increasingly become a flexible method that can be utilised independently (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Hence, this study employed thematic analysis to identify and report useful patterns in the responses of the Nigerian top management and HR professionals interviewed.

The analysis process initially focused on reading the transcripts to familiarise with the data and identify themes drawn from the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The next stage involved line-by-line coding to locate additional themes. Then, we focused on identifying useful utterances, extracting pertinent information, and grouping this according to themes and patterns to reflect the study aim (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Esmaeili et al., 2014). The themes were collated within each code through tagging and naming the chunks of text within each data item. Using axial coding, we identified the relationships between the numerous themes developed, which were mapped to the initial themes developed from the literature using NVivo mapping. The themes were sorted into different overarching themes and sub-themes to explain the inter-theme relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Most overarching themes were developed from the initial literature review, whilst the majority of the sub-themes in the informal institutional factors were in-vivo codes derived from the data analysis. In the subsequent analysis stage, we revisited the data iteratively to confirm the themes and relationships identified, and ensure that all relevant themes were coded. Finally, we refined, defined, and organised the themes into a coherent and internally consistent framework to explain the influence of contextual factors on

the CS–HRMP nexus in MSEs in the Nigeria context. From the data analysis, we developed a theoretical framework and identified specific formal and informal institutional factors that influence the CS–HRMP nexus.

Findings

We present the findings of this study using the theoretical framework (Figure 2) developed from the data analysis. This study is based on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with HR professionals and top management in MSEs in Nigeria. First, we discuss the reason for linking CS and HRMPs, and identify that achieving a competitive advantage involves the alignment of HRMP with the purpose and objectives of the CS. We then explore the HRMP and CS options adopted in MSEs. We also identify the rationale for the nexus as the potential role of employee behaviour and attitude. Next we discuss how the Nigeria context influences the CS–HRMP nexus. Finally, we consider the Nigerian MSEs' CS and HRMPs, and the contextual factors influencing role behaviour and the CS–HRMP nexus.
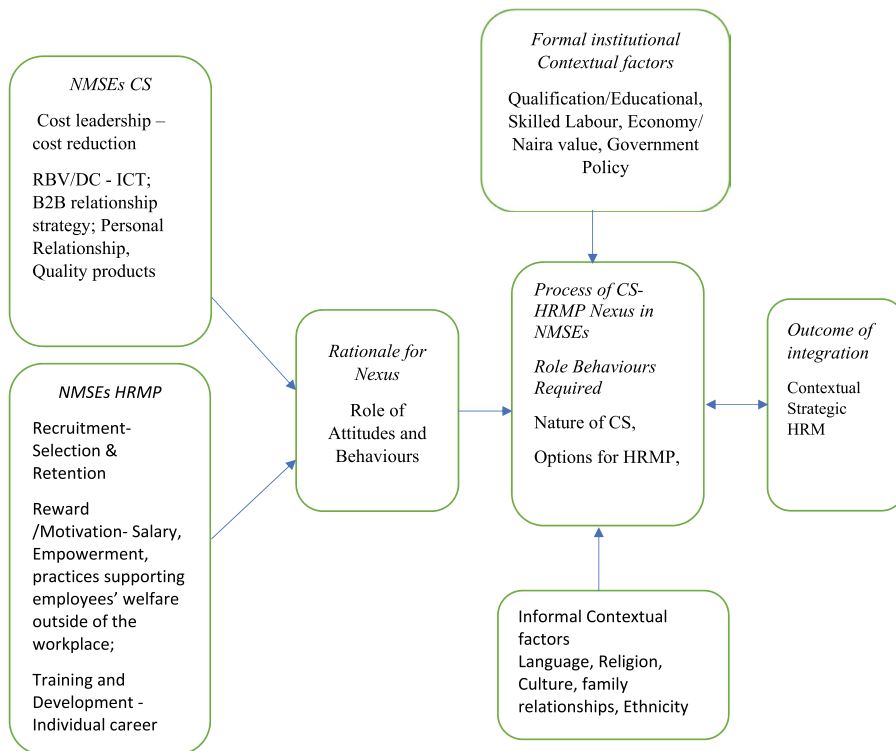

Figure 2. The theoretical framework of contextual institutional factors influencing the CS–HRMP nexus.

Contextual behaviours required for the nexus

There are many behaviours exhibited for the achievement and sustenance of CS and HRMP. In this study, we identify five main contextual role behaviours for the nexus: moral behaviour, optimal culture, individual and consensus behaviour, reporting relationships, and control policies. In consideration of their influence on the nexus, the participants identified cultural influences in the workplace. Nigeria is a culturally diverse society, where this culture is transferred in most cases to the workplace. The respondents identified the crucial impact that culture plays on the CS–HRMP nexus, whereby the role of the societal culture assists in developing the moral behaviour of employees necessary for the development, acceptance, and successful implementation of CS and HRMPs.

The Nigerian culture involves the reverence of elders and seniors, whereby this respect for elders transcends into the organisational culture. Thus, respect for seniority, manners of greeting and a moral framework comprise part of the fabric of Nigerian society and become integrated in organisational culture:

> 'We are very cultural people, so accepted ways of reacting to top management [are] recognised and emphasise seniority.'

Therefore, regarding the integration of CS and HRMP, the respect for seniors and top management lends itself to acceptance of the integration process.

Further, the participants stated that for strategies to be successful there should be an optimal culture in the development and implementation of the strategy. The MSEs in Nigeria harmonise the national and individual culture with the organisational culture to create a positive value in the CS–HRMP nexus:

> 'So, to harness the value of the cultural behaviour of individuals we integrate and harmonise cultures to our unique good.'

Closely related to culture, the impact of religion on developing moral behaviour for the nexus was identified, with the religious nature of Nigerians and teachings by Christians and Muslims impacting positively on the moral behaviour and respect in the workplace:

> 'However, spirituality, especially Christians and Muslims, have formed groups for fellowship which, from personal opinion, have [a] positive impact on the moral values of workers. This ensures order, respect and good moral behaviours.'

It is particularly interesting to note how spirituality has a positive impact on religious values, and that religious values have positive impact on the employees' moral behaviour and actions in the workplace.

Ethnicity also affects behaviours by influencing the development of controls based on fairness. The ethnic composition of an organisation's

management board may give rise in certain cases to discontent in the workforce, while ethnic psychology can lead to management conflict:

> 'When someone is promoted for doing something good, you have to prove that the person is doing well; if not they will say you are tribalistic. Even when you prove it, some people will still see it from an ethnic point of view, you see. So, we put measures of control [in place], so justice and fair play is served.'

Thus, ethnicity influences the type of control system developed to impact the nexus.

Type and nature of CS

The analysis of the data showed that MSEs in Nigeria employ low cost (LC) or cost leadership and RBV/dynamic capability (DC) strategies. The nature of the LC strategy requires sustainable cost-reduction behaviours, strict cost controls, and economies of scale in all aspects of the MSEs in Nigeria to achieve competitive advantage. The data analysis reveals that the second CS used by MSEs in Nigeria in the CS–HRMP nexus is RBV/DC. According to the participants, the nature of RBV/DC strategies requires MSEs in Nigeria to employ their internal resources and competencies to develop value, uniqueness, inimitability, and organisation to compete and achieve competitive advantage. These are utilised to develop the firm's capabilities to exploit their resources to create value for customers and ensure a competitive advantage. Personal relationships create a base for exploiting opportunities of benefit to businesses: 'our network of relationships [is] the first thing.' This is vitally linked to family orientation, which plays an essential role in Nigerian SMEs, most of which are family- or individual-owned businesses.

Contextual factors influencing the selection of CS

The analysis of the data revealed many contextual factors that impact on the CS–HRMP nexus (see Figure 2). We found that the type and nature of contextual factors vary in the different industry sectors and the extent of CS and HRMP choice. From the data in Appendices 1 and 2, while most of the sectors are affected by similar formal contextual institutional factors, the informal contextual institutional factors vary amongst the different industry sectors. From the analysis, family relationships play an important role for MSEs in Nigeria in the event management and hospitality sectors. As an informal contextual institutional factor, culture is ubiquitous across all the sectors and contributes positively to the nexus of CS and HRMPs. However, for some participants, religion is identified as a major informal contextual factor in the events/hospitality, education, health, and IT sectors, whilst language is

considered an influential element in the events/hospitality, construction, and education sectors. In view of the above point, the respondents noted that: *"spirituality, especially Christians and Muslims, helps to create moral order, religious respect, and good moral behaviours".* The contextual factors of qualification/education and economy are particularly influential in the CS–HRMP nexus of the banking and health sectors, respectively, whilst the industry sectors are impacted by two or more of the formal institutional factors.

Formal contextual institutional factors influencing the selection of CS

The Nigerian economy critically influences the development of the LC-type strategy within the nexus, which is due to the fragile nature of the Nigerian economy, the volatility of the exchange rate, and escalating cost issues associated with operations.

The respondents identified radical economic changes as affecting effective linkage due to increasing management, production, and delivery costs, and the diminishing purchasing value of the Naira currency. The respondents linked the poor performance of the economy to the concerted efforts required to maintain acceptable working conditions:

> 'We have [a] tough economy now, and things are getting harder and harder, and maintaining our workers' conditions is not easy anymore.'

Regarding the purchasing value of the Naira on the international markets, the respondents believed that it negatively impacts their import and export businesses:

> 'Even the high and unbearable rise in exchanging dollars and other foreign currencies has affected our purchases…it is adversely affecting us now.'

The respondents also linked the weak economy to corrupt practices in the oil sector and state-owned enterprises. Corruption thus leads to increased operational costs, as well as the loss of skilled workers and payments:

> 'Sometimes you just get frustrated, my brother, when you are given a contract and you carry out the contract, [and then] payment becomes a problem. The government will not pay; even when they pay up, you have lost a lot of money, lost workers and lost businesses.'

Therefore, the MSEs in Nigeria develop a CS that reduces cost in their operations to achieve a competitive advantage.

Informal contextual institutional factors influencing the selection of CS

Culture also plays a critical role in the influence, nature, and selection of an LC strategy in MSEs in Nigeria. Frugality prevails in the

indigenous Nigerian culture as an emerging economy. Hence, the LC strategy resonates with the realities of life and the need to operate economically in the Nigeria context. Therefore, MSEs in Nigeria are more likely to accept the LC strategy developed in relation to their beliefs and values, rather than strategies imposed from different cultures, with one participant confirming the role of culture:

'There is always diversity in culture and religion in many organisations in Nigeria. We have cultural issues that different cultures have different approaches to doing things. And although the traditional indigenous culture had changed a bit with the coming of Christian and Muslim culture, we still have to consider the cultural issues about how to manage in our organisations.'

The data analysis revealed that the RBV/DC CS utilised by MSEs in Nigeria in the CS–HRMP nexus focuses on context-based CS using quality products, personal and B2B value-based relationships and ICT as limited strategy types employed due to the influence of the contextual factors in Nigeria. According to the participants, the choice of personal and B2B relationship strategies stems from the close-knit family relationships in Nigeria. Significantly, the respondents also considered religion as intrinsic to how people behave.

Linguistic affinity

Closely related to culture and religion is language differences:

'People want to work with people of [the] same language; they want to be sent to work with people of [the] same tribe and language.'

Although minimal emphasis was made regarding language distinction in the workplace, due to the prevalent use of English and 'broken English', there was still mention of the challenges of engaging people in areas of work where their mother tongue is not spoken.

The HRMP options for LC/RBV and contextual influences

The analysis indicated that the type of CS selected will determine the HRMP options for the nexus and is influenced by the contextual factors in Nigeria. The results also showed that the types of HRMPs used in MSEs in Nigeria include recruitment (selection and retention), training and development (individual career path development), welfare (supporting employee well-being), appraisal systems (performance evaluation) and disciplinary practices, and ethnicity and linguistic affinity. On examination of the theoretical perspectives that underpin the choice of HRMP in MSEs in Nigeria, the results highlight the influence of contextual and HRMP-bundling perspectives.

Recruitment

For LC, the data showed that most recruited employees are low-to-medium-skilled, as LC does not require talent for the integration of CS. The focus of LC is the ability to cut costs, be involved in repetitive tasks, economies of scale, and adherence to strict cost control. The level of skill required for LC is affected by the contextual factor of quality education and the lack of highly qualified and skilled labour in Nigeria as an emerging economy:

> 'This is about getting the right workers for the right jobs; the quality of graduates out in the job market is often short of what we want in our areas.'

Notably, the impact of the standard of education in Nigeria manifests in the strategic resourcing and recruitment of staff who will effectively contribute to the implementation of an LC strategy.

The data analysis indicated that the weak Nigerian economy and depreciating value of the Naira affect Nigeria MSEs' strategic plans for workforce recruitment, development, and retention. Therefore, an LC strategy requiring low-to-medium-skilled staff, fewer staff numbers or using temporary staff is the recruitment choice of Nigeria MSEs in the CS–HRMP nexus.

Training and development

Learning is critical to cost-control measures, with the findings showing that training and development are imperative in the nexus of LC due to the strict cost-control competencies required. Due to the prevailing educational levels in Nigeria, most of the workforce do not have the requisite skills for implementing an LC strategy, and thus Nigeria MSEs invest in additional training and development:

> 'I am an HR in the banking sector. We have a substantial number of graduates, but in the end, we retrain them because many of them do not know what to do even after graduation.'

Specifically, training and development options are critical in RBV strategies due to the need to develop capabilities to improve on product quality and develop social relationship strategies to achieve a competitive advantage. For instance, in some Nigeria MSEs the training practices focus on the retention and development of required skills, 'We train them to encourage them to perform better', whilst in others they simply serve as an incentive for a longer period of service.

The analysis further indicated that the lack of adequate funding determines the type and level of training and development activities. Government policies also affect the type of training and development for the nexus. Although the Nigerian government has implemented plans and policy to

enhance SME growth in Nigeria, issues remain regarding the sourcing of funding for Nigeria MSEs to operate effectively and grow:

> 'We also encounter issues with sourcing funding that has been put aside for businesses by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and Bank of Industry (BO1)'

The issue of financing is vital for formulating and investing in adequate programmes of employee development and commitment.

Welfare

The respondents stated that culture has a positive influence on driving improved working conditions in MSEs in Nigeria: '*we are very cultural people, so accepted ways of reacting to top management are recognised…and help*.' As such, cultural values fundamentally increase employees' sense of social belonging which, in turn, affects employee productivity, well-being, and retention. A significant practice adopted by MSEs in Nigeria relates to social support for the well-being of employees outside the workplace environment, and places considerable premium on offering social support and practices to employees beyond the workplace: '*providing general support to them in all circumstances and expecting a good commitment from them…take care of them when they have good thing or in bereavement…we give them support in personal family needs*.' This implies that the organisation supports its employees extensively, and not only in situations that directly relate to their jobs. Thus, employees are accompanied in events related to cultural activities, social achievements, bereavements, and festive religious seasons, as well as being offered financial support and social publicity where required. The social approach is not performed as a matter of professional courtesy, but as a fundamental practice of the organisation.

Appraisal systems/disciplinary practices

Importantly, the findings suggested that the MSEs in Nigeria harness various aspects of individual cultures and organisational cultures in the CS–HRMP nexus to create value, which places greater pressure on the management of MSEs in Nigeria to harmonise the individual and organisational cultures' rules and policies to guide behaviours.

> 'We hand down rules and policies to…harmonise cultures to our unique good.'

> 'We work on laying down rules and policies that guide individual behaviours.'

Further, the influence of culture and ethnicity assist in the development of fair and transparent control systems for appraisals, promotions, and disciplinary practices.

Discussion

We explored contextual factors for the nexus of CS and HRMP in an emerging economy context, developing a theoretical model that explicates how the contextual factors affect the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria. Our theoretical model explains the shared understanding of the rationale for the nexus, the types of CS and HRMP, and the influence of the contextual factors on the nexus. We found that the CS–HRMP relationship involves fundamental decisions on the type and nature of CS, the type and HRMP options, and existing structural factors in the organisation. The CS–HRMP relationship further entails the rationale for the nexus, the types of contextual factors and their impact on the nature and choice of CS, and the selection of HRMPs. Further, our novel findings and theoretical model show how the contextual factors affect the decisions of the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria, with implications for SHRM, social and comparative institutional theories, the MSEs and strategy literature, practice, and policy.

We identified two categories of contextual institutional factors—informal and formal—that affect the nexus positively or negatively. On the positive effect of the **informal contextual factors**, culture and value system, religion, and ethnicity play crucial roles in the CS–HRMP nexus selection and options in the Nigeria context. Although the cultural and value system variable's impact on managerial decisions and practices is well documented (Chen et al., 2018; Park & Kim, 2016; Rezaei et al., 2020), its connection to the CS–HRMP nexus in the Nigeria context is under-explored. Despite the extant literature (Rao, 2013; Sparrow & Wu, 1998; Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003) asserting that people can affect an organisation's core HRM decisions positively or negatively, our findings establish that culture has a positive influence in creating moral behaviours for the selection and implementation of CS and HRMPs. It also assists with the improvement of working conditions in MSEs in Nigeria due to the prevailing reverence to elders and the cultural values of family relationships that fundamentally increases employees' social belonging and boosts their moral behaviour resulting in the acceptance and implementation of CS and HRMPs. We delineated the specific cultural values that affect the nexus as the strong emphasis on seniority, high level of contact involvement, and the 'oga' mentality that sways the balance in employer–employee relationships (Fajana et al., 2011), engendering a positive response and acceptance of the SHRM introducted. We elaborated the importance placed on personal relationships and family orientation, which contributes to the richness of relationships in key organisational decision-making, the selection of the RBV strategy, and motivation.

Further, although CS–HRMP researchers give minimal importance to religion, we identified that religion positively influences the CS–HRMPs nexus in the emerging African economy of Nigeria. Religious values thus play an important role in SHRM adoption and application in MSEs in Nigeria (Adogame, 2010; Meagher, 2009). Our study demonstrates that Nigerians interpret workplace events in terms of religious intervention, with religious sentiments and emotions normally expressed (Salawu, 2010). The teachings of the three main religions—Christianity, Islam, and traditional—also influenced the development of positive moral behaviour required for the integration, acceptance, and articulation of the CS–HRMP nexus. Hence, we suggest that spirituality has a positive impact on religious values, and that religious values have a positive impact on the employees' moral behaviours and actions in the nexus. Although ethnicity is a common theme in the diversity management literature (Collier, 2019), it is rarely explored in relation to SHRM in emerging economies. The extant literature shows that ethnicity features in areas of HR delivery including employee resourcing, identity construction, ethnic framing, and career development (Adisa et al., 2017; Arifeen & Syed, 2019). This study demonstrates that ethnicity engenders the moral behaviour required for the nexus through the development of controls based on fairness and transparency, which influence the moral behaviours necessary for the CS–HRMP nexus in emerging economies. Therefore, the following propositions are proposed:

> **Proposition 1:** *Informal institutional factors positively influence the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria.*

> **Proposition 2:** *The culture and the cultural value system, religion, and ethnicity engender moral behaviours that lead to the optimal culture, individual and consensus behaviour, reverence of seniority, and fairness control policies required for the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria.*

We also establish the specific **formal institutional factors** that negatively affect the CS–HRMP nexus in the Nigeria context: government policy, economic changes, and low-skilled workforce and quality of education. Despite the extant literature claiming that the Nigerian Government's policies impact positively or negatively on organisational processes (Eniola & Entebang, 2015; Salma & Khan, 2016), our findings illustrate that such policies only have a negative impact in terms of funding for training, and the development and use of contract workers in an LC strategy. The economy's impact on CS–HRMP is well documented in the SHRM literature (Emeti, 2012; Hendry & Pettigrew, 1986), since an organisation's ability to conduct strategic activities and implement strategic choices depends on the resources available to complete such activities. Financial resources have a strong impact on organisational

decisions and can either impede or enhance the CS and choice of HRMPs (Bae & Lawler, 2000). We demonstrate that the moderating factor in the CS–HRMP relationship is the poor state of the economy that affects the currency value, with the weakened Naira and its depreciation over recent years compared to western currencies (CBN., 2016). In addition, the increased costs affect the choice of CS and HRMPs, which negatively impact the strategic plans for workforce recruitment, development, and retention. Effective education and the availability of skilled labour contribute towards developing the capable and competent workforce required by organisations to develop and implement their strategic goals. In Nigeria's case, it is evident that the education standard heavily affects resourcing and the readiness of new entrants to the employment market (Ikyanyon et al., 2020). Our findings show that the effect of educational quality and the availability of a skilled workforce affect the strategic resourcing, recruitment of workers to contribute towards implementing the HRM strategy, and investment in further training and development. Consequently, the following proposition is proposed:

> **Proposition 3:** *Formal institutional factors negatively influence the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria.*

Our study provides further evidence that the CS–HRMP nexus involves a process approach presented in our theoretical framework. The different stages are all essential to the integration process. Moreover, there is a paucity of studies on the role, rationale, formal and informal contextual factors, and how these influence the choice and selection of CS and HRMP, while factors such as religion, ethnicity, and language have not been associated with SHRM. Our theoretical model demonstrates that these factors are an important component of the process, and their influence has been thoroughly discussed.

Further, we developed our framework based on social and comparative institutional theories, and thus the contextual institutional approach is a prominent feature in the CS–HRMP nexus. We identify the first part of the process as the rationale for the nexus in MSEs in Nigeria, which involves the role of behaviours and attitudes of employees to ensure the alignment of CS and HRMP (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). We suggest that behaviours and attitudes are pertinent to the effective development and implementation of CS–HRMP strategy in MSEs in Nigeria, whereby the contextual behaviours required for the nexus are moral behaviour, which leads to optimal culture, individual and consensus behaviour, reverence of seniority, and fairness control policies. Although this finding confirms Schuler and Jackson (1987) role behaviour for linkage, it does not identify specific contextual role behaviours for the CS–HRMP nexus.

Our findings therefore contribute to the SHRM literature by identifying the specific contextual role of necessary behaviours, namely, moral behaviours that facilitate the creation of the optimal organisational culture, systems, and policies required for the CS–HRMP nexus. Furthermore, the study highlights the positive influence of societal culture, religion, and ethnicity as informal contextual factors for the development of role behaviours for the nexus. For example, due to the power culture of Nigerian national culture (Hofstede, 2006), employees transfer their respect for the elderly to respect for their superiors, which influences organisational discipline, moral behaviour, and the acceptance of strategy. Our findings suggest that individual behaviours are linked to the organisation's collective and societal behaviours for developing optimal behaviour for the CS–HRMP nexus. Therefore, our studies on SHRM aim at both individual organisational and societal behaviours within organisations to achieve the nexus. The process outlined in this study will thus have continuous relevance to the research and development of new knowledge involving the CS–HRMP nexus in emerging economies. Therefore, the following propositions are proposed:

> *Proposition 4: The nexus of CS–HRMP is an integrated process, which involves fundamental decisions on the rationale, types, and nature of CS; the types and HRMP options; and the existing structural factors in the organisation.*

> *Proposition 5: The integration process of the CS–HRMP nexus is influenced by the rationale of attitudes and moral behaviours, and the formal and informal contextual factors.*

We also identify the specific options of HRMP for the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria MSEs: reward and motivation, empowerment (practices supporting employee welfare outside the workplace), training and development (individual career development), appraisal systems (performance evaluation), and disciplinary practices. Although the findings of the HRMPs options are similar to those adopted by SMEs in Nigeria for general HRM (Anakwe, 2002; Orga & Ogbo, 2012; Fajana et al., 2011; Fajana & Ige, 2009; Gadi & Hung, 2018; Ikyanyon et al., 2020; Nwachukwu & Chladkova, 2017; Tabiu et al., 2016; Tabiu & Nura, 2013), our study suggests appropriate HRMPs for the CS-HRMP nexus. While the manner of the application and nature of practice are moderated by the specific context in the literature (Fajana et al., 2011; Ikyanyon et al., 2020), our findings illustrate that the contextual institutional factors determine the HRMP options and the choice of CS in relation to the nexus. In effect, the only applicable HRMPs are those relevant to the type and nature of CS in the integration process. Consequently the following propositions is proposed:

> *Proposition 6: The specific CS choices and HRMP options for the nexus are influenced by the formal and informal institutional contextual factors in Nigeria*

This paper links the use of the social and comparative institutional theories to examine the contextual factors for the CS–HRMP nexus. Thus, our paper demonstrates that such theories provide new theoretical insights to explain this nexus, while strengthening the conceptualisation of the formal and informal institutional contextual factors. Further, this is the first work on the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria. Institutional theories covered in the international HRM literature are limited to institutional distance and duality (Kostova & Roth, 2002), and the transfer of HRMPs and capabilities (Gooderham et al., 1999), with insufficient focus placed on the CS–HRMP nexus. We utilise social and comparative institutional theories as a moderating link of the contextual factors for the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria. Through relying on this body of theory and our findings, this study accepts a relationship between culture and institutions in theory and practice. Thus, by linking the SHRM literature and the social and comparative institutional theories, this study theoretically ascertains a positive relationship between SHRM and such theories through the empirical evidence gathered.

Moreover, this research establishes the relevance of the in-depth analysis of individual factors and their implications for developing HR strategies and CS in Nigerian organisations. We contribute to studies in the SHRM domain that focus on both individual behaviours and social aspects within organisations. This study is particularly timely and pertinent in the light of increasing calls for more context-specific and practice-based approaches in HRM research (Beer et al., 2015; Kaufman, 2015), and the need to re-think HRMPs owing to turbulent business environments that differ between countries (Psychogios et al., 2019). As such, the theoretical framework could form a foundation for further empirical studies investigating a broader range of principal components of African institutions and cultures that moderate the establishment and application of SHRM practices, thus enhancing the drive to establish a strategic approach to people management in Nigeria.

Practical implications

Our paper has a number of practical and policy implications. First, the theoretical model offers a practical approach for MSEs in Nigeria to integrate CS and HRMP. Our study suggests that MSEs in Nigeria should focus on the different processes and options in the integration mode. The different components—rationale, and the role of formal and informal contextual factors—and their influence on the choice and selection of CS and HRMP are all essential to effective nexus of CS–HRMP. We note that although certain specific factors such as religion, ethnicity, and language have not been associated with SHRM (Gadi & Hung, 2018;

Ikyanyon et al., 2020; Nwachukwu & Chladkova, 2017), our theoretical model shows these factors to be important components of the process.

Second, by highlighting the specific formal and informal contextual factors and the role each plays in the CS–HRMP nexus, we suggest that MSEs in Nigeria must manage these factors effectively in the SHRM process. For example, although culture positively influences the CS–HRMP nexus, fundamentally, the pressures to engage with the different modes of cultural and value-driven individual and societal behaviours in the development of the CS–HRMP nexus represent additional management responsibilities (Chen et al., 2018; Rezaei et al., 2020). This paper thus highlights the need for MSEs in Nigeria to manage their enterprises' conditional, institutional, and personal resources to effectively manage the differing cultural systems and achieve positive behaviours for the nexus. Harnessing these positive behaviours will lead to improved integration and resource allocation to achieve the strategic goals and objectives.

Third, the negative effects of the formal contextual factors on the CS–HRMP nexus have significant policy implications. This study suggests that the government's ability to develop subsidy-based investment policies to support the economy and financing for MSEs in Nigeria is imperative to the development of SHRM. For example, the extant literature (Wang, 2016) asserts that SMEs perform better when they have government guarantees for financing. However, we suggest that understanding these implications will inform an improved approach for the mobilisation of financial and other resources, and reduce the costs that negatively affect the nexus in Nigeria's MSEs.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that the use, type, nature, and influence of contextual factors vary amongst the different industry sectors included in the study (Rao, 2013; Sparrow & Wu, 1998; Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003). The study demonstrates that the different industry sectors included in the research are affected by similar formal contextual factors and one informal contextual factor (culture), while the other informal contextual factors varied amongst the different industry sectors (see Appendix 3). Thus, organisations may select CS and HRMPs that are appropriate to their contextual factors within their sector or industry to achieve an effective nexus.

Contribution to theory

This study contributes to the SHRM literature in several ways, due to exploring the neglected role of context-specific factors in the CS–HRMP nexus in emerging economies. Although it is generally accepted that contextual factors affect HRMPs (Seitio-Kgokgwe et al., 2016; Ikynonon et al, 2020), with studies investigating the phenomenon slowly gathering prominence, there is a paucity of knowledge on the types and how the contextual

factors influence the CS–HRMP nexus. Thus, the first major contribution of this study is the provision of empirical evidence regarding the context-specific factors that affect SHRM practices and their importance to emerging economies. The findings are pertinent given the uncertainty regarding the applicability of western HRMP models in African contexts (Ayentimi et al., 2018; Azungah et al., 2018; Hack-Polay et al., 2020). Thus, we contribute to the SHRM literature by identifying the processes and approach of how contextual factors influence the rationale and the choice of CS and HRMPs to develop contextual SHRM in an emerging economy.

The second contribution to the SHRM literature focuses on the contextual factors affecting the nexus of CS and HMRP as critical components in the emerging economy context. Despite past research recognising the crucial role of contextual factors in HRM and organisational performance (Edgar et al., 2018; Ikyayon et al, 2020; Mesquita et al., 2015), the identification of the specific contextual factors for the CS–HRMP nexus in MSEs in Nigeria is limited. Thus, we extend the general role of contextual factors for HRM and organisational performance to include the specific contextual institutional factors that influence the degree and form of the CS–HRMP nexus in an emerging economy context. Drawing on social and comparative institutional theories, we provide a clearer perspective of the two categories of contextual institutional factors that influence the nexus: (i) formal in terms of qualification/education, skilled labour, economy, and government policy; and (ii) informal through language, religion, culture, family, and ethnicity.

Third, there is lack of studies in SHRM that address the degree to which the formal and informal contextual factors affect the nexus in MSEs in Nigeria. Our study establishes that the formal and informal contextual institutional factors affect the nexus differently, whereby the formal factors impose a negative influence whilst the informal factors have a positive influence in the selection of CS–HRMP options and formulating the role behaviours required for the nexus in Nigeria.

To the best of our knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to study the CS–HRMP nexus and HRM in MSEs in an African emerging economy. The integration of the literature and theories thus affords a nuanced understanding of the impact of the contextual factors on the CS–HRMP nexus in MSEs in Nigeria. This is pertinent due to the importance of Nigeria MSEs as a key driving force of economic growth (Okpara, 2015), accounting for 96% of businesses and 84% of employment (SMEDAN. , 2017), and the need to improve strategic growth. The strategic aim of organisations is to prosper and achieve competitive advantage within their markets, and therefore CSs are developed (Schuler & Jackson, 1987). We contribute to the strategy and SME literature by establishing that Nigeria MSEs adopt two main CSs: LC and

resource-based strategies focusing on personal and B2B relationships, quality products and the use of ICT for the nexus. This is consistent with the literature on the CSs used by SMEs in Nigeria (Chijioke, 2016; Eniola and Ektebang, 2015; Gbadegeshin et al., 2018; Uchegbulam et al., 2015); however, we identify LC as the predominant CS for the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria MSEs. Therefore, we complement the literature by highlighting the types and nature of CS and the predominant strategy for the nexus in the Nigeria MSE context.

Limitations and future research

Despite the novel findings, this study has limitations, which provide opportunities for further research. First, due to the lack of research on the contextual factors for the CS–HRMP nexus in Nigeria, this is a novel phenomenon requiring further investigation to explore and replicate the study. Second, since we employed a qualitative research approach, the findings cannot be generalised to other sectors and industries apart from the cases and participants included in the study. Therefore, this exploratory and interpretative study creates opportunities for further empirical research on theory development or construct validation. In addition, studies are required to analyse the specific contextual factors and statistically establish the strength of their influence on the CS–HRMP nexus. Moreover, future research could examine specific CS–HRMP types, where a correlational study could establish the extent of the CS–HRMP nexus and specific contextual factors, allowing greater statistical generalisability. Additionally, the developed framework could be used to generate several hypotheses for further quantitative study, with questions including the correlation of CS and HRMPs in Nigeria, and the relationship of the contextual factors and the CS–HRMP linkage.

Although we explored the contextual factors in this study, we did not examine which of the factors have greater influence in the different industry and business sectors investigated. Therefore, there are opportunities for further studies to focus on the specific or comparative analysis of industry sectors to establish which factors have a greater impact on businesses in different sectors. This would be exceptionally beneficial when the distinct industry's peculiarities are considered in establishing the choice of HRMP and CS types.

Furthermore, we recognise that this study focused on the emerging economy context of Nigeria, and hence is limited in application to other emerging economies. Nevertheless, it can form a basis for further studies in other sub-Saharan emerging economies that could be comparative or longitudinal, leading to historical and differential cultural or tribal approaches across the developing world.

This is the first work on the nexus of CS and HRMP in Nigeria that utilised the social and comparative institutional theoretical lens. Although institutional theory has been applied in a plethora of HRM research, primarily in institutional distance, duality, capability and practice transfer, this is the first time such theory has been applied to the nexus of CS and HRMP. We opine that SHRM has been characterised by universalist assumptions that have overlooked the contexts within which organisations operate. Thus, we suggest future studies extend our findings through investigating contextual factors using social and comparative institutional theories beyond formal and informal factors to examine the interactive effects, influences, and impact on the development and implementation of the CS–HRMP nexus.

Finally, this study explored the richness of the MSE as a context with more advanced and more formalised strategic content than small and micro enterprises. However, it is arguable that the MSEs in the sector may not possess fully developed strategies in comparison to large organisations, thus offering a unique opportunity for further studies in large organisations in emerging economies. Future research could also develop a nuanced understanding of the roles the different contextual factors play in different emerging economy contexts.

Conclusion

In an era of an increasing shift towards context-specific research in SHRM, this study provides insight on the moderating influence of contextual factors on the CS–HRMP nexus in the Nigeria emerging economy context. Drawing on the social and comparative theoretical lens, we conducted research that provides exploratory insights into the specific contextual factors that affect the CS–HRMP nexus both positively and negatively. Our study therefore, provides the avenue for further studies on the CS–HRMP nexus in emerging economies, through exploring and validating what and how contextual factors moderate the CS–HRMP nexus. In this regard, we encourage future studies in this area in other emerging economies. We also encourage further comparative studies across emerging economies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and/or its supplementary materials.

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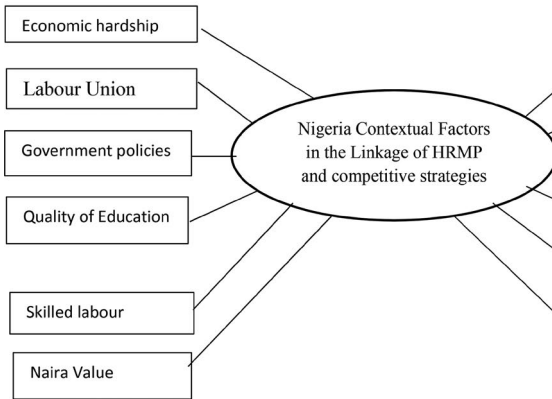
Appendix 1. Indicative interview scripts showing cluster themes of contextual factors

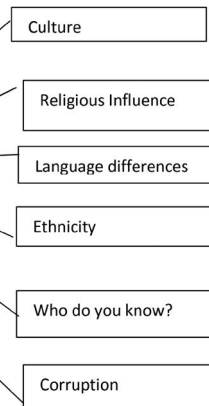| Key sentences	Cluster/themes
"'There is always diversity in culture and religion in many organizations in Nigeria. We have cultural issues in that different cultures have their different approaches to doing things. And although the traditional culture that used to had changed a bit with the coming of Christian and Muslim culture, we still have to consider the cultural issues about to how to manage in our organizations".	Culture, Cultural issues, Seniority, Religion, Language & tribe, ethnicity, Government policies, Economy,
work on laying down rules and policies that guide individual behaviours. We integrate and harmonise cultures to our unique good'	Naira value, Corruption – lack of payment, Quality of labour,
religion has never been of any issue in what we do in this business". volatile".	Tough economy, Exchange rates,
'However, spirituality especially Christians and Muslims have formed groups for fellowship which from opinion have positive impact on the moral values of workers. This ensures order, respect and good moral behaviours'	Moral values, Volatile environment Religion, Same tribe, and language,
'broken English' 'people want to work with people of same language, they want to be sent to work with people of same tribe and language.'	Government bottle necks, Quality of graduates, Retraining graduates,
there are a lot of bureaucratic bottle necks in getting registration and renewal of registration from the government. We also encounter issues with sourcing funding that have been put aside for businesses by the CBN and BOI'.	Funding issues with government,
we have tough economy now, things are really getting harder and harder, and maintaining our worker's conditions is not easy anymore". "Even the high and unbearable rise in exchanging dollars and other foreign currencies have affected our purchases…it is adversely affecting us now	
'Sometimes you just get frustrated, my brother, when you are given a contract and you carry out the contract, payment becomes a problem. The government will not pay, even when they pay up, you have lost a lot of money, lost workers and lost businesses.'	
this is about getting the right workers for the right jobs, the quality of graduates out in the job market are often short of what we want in our areas. I am a HR in a banking sector. We have a lot of graduates but in the end, we retrain them because many of them don't really know what to do even after graduation".	
when someone is promoted for doing something good, you must prove that the person is doing well, if not they will say you are tribalistic, even when you prove it, some people will still see it from ethnic point of view, you see. So, we put measures of control, so justice and fair play is served	
'Sometimes you just get frustrated, my brother, when you are given a contract and you carry out the contract, payment becomes a problem.	
"This is about getting the right workers for the right jobs, the quality of graduates out in the job market are	
"When someone is promoted for doing something good, you must prove that the person is doing well, if not they will say you are tribalistic	

Appendix 2. Thematic mapping from NVivo 12 analysis

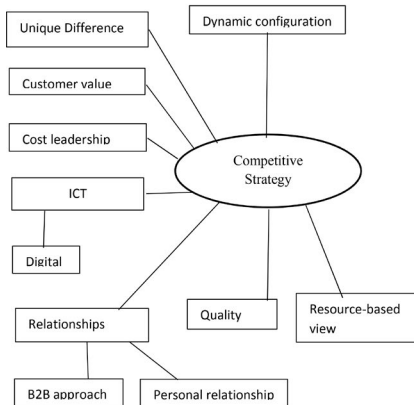Formal institutions informal institutions

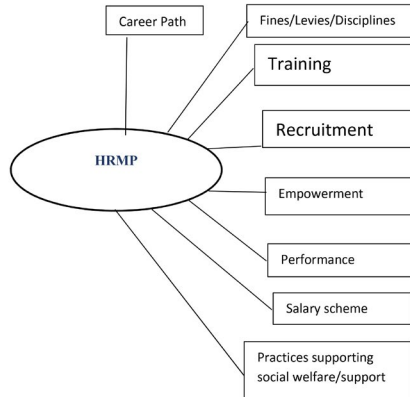**Formal Institutions**   **Informal Institutions**

Competitive strategies HRM practices

Appendix 3. Key industry sector contextual factors

Industry sector	Competitive strategies	Informal institutional factors	Formal institutional factors	Examples of responses relating to the factors
Education	ICT, Cost Leadership, RBV	Religion, Language	Qualification/ Educational, Skilled Labour, Economy,	*'This is about getting the right workers for the right jobs, the quality of graduates out in the job market '* *However, spirituality, especially Christians and Muslims, have formed groups for fellowship which, from opinion, have [a] positive impact on the moral values of workers. This ensures order, respect and good moral behaviours'.*
Construction	Cost Leadership, Product Quality, Personal Relationship	Language, Culture	Skilled Labour, Economy Naira value, Government Policy	*'The government will not pay; even when they pay up, you have lost a lot of money, lost workers and lost businesses'* *People want to work with people of [the] same language; they want to be sent to work with people of [the] same tribe and language'.*
Banking & Financial Services	Product Quality, Cost Leadership, RBV	Culture	Qualification/ Educational	*'I am a HR in a banking sector. We have a lot of graduates but in the end, we retrain them because many of them don't really know what to do even after graduation'*
Health	RBV, Product Quality	Culture, Religion	Economy	*'Even the high and unbearable rise in exchanging dollars and other foreign currencies has affected our purchases'* *spirituality, especially Christians and Muslims, helps to create moral order, religious respect, and good moral behaviours*
IT & Information	ICT, Product Quality, Cost Leadership	Culture, Religion	Economy, Naira value, Government Policy	*'We also encounter issues with sourcing funding that has been put aside for businesses by the CBN and BOI'* *We are very cultural people, so accepted ways of reacting to top management [are] recognised in and emphasise seniority*

(*Continued*)

Appendix 3. (Continued)

Industry sector	Competitive strategies	Informal institutional factors	Formal institutional factors	Examples of responses relating to the factors
Media	ICT, Cost Leadership, Personal Relationship	Culture	Skilled Labour, Economy Naira value, Government Policy,	'There are a lot of bureaucratic bottlenecks in getting registration and renewal of registration from the government.' We integrate and harmonise cultures to our unique good
Oil & Gas	Product Quality, Personal Relationship	Culture	Skilled Labour, Economy Naira value, Government Policy	'…when you are given a contract and you carry out the contract, [and then] payment becomes a problem' . We have cultural issues in that different cultures have their different approaches to doing things. And although the traditional culture that used to had changed a bit with the coming of Christian and Muslim culture, we still must consider the cultural issues about to how to manage in our organisations
Events Management/ Hospitality	B2B relationship, Cost Leadership, Product Quality, RBV, Personal Relationship	Family, Culture, language, Religion	Economy Naira value,	'…to work with people of [the] same language; they want to be sent to work with people of [the] same tribe and language' 'When someone is promoted for doing something good, you have to prove that the person is doing well; if not they will say you are tribalistic. Even when you prove it, some people will still see it from ethnic point of view, you see. So, we put measures of control, so justice and fair play are served'

Appendix 4. Interview guide

Appendix 4. Samples of interview questions

Sample Interview Questions – interview guide

Topic Area: Competitive Strategies
Sample Questions:
What competitive strategies are used by your organisation?
Why have you adopted this type of competitive strategies?
What roles do you play in the formulation and implementation of your competitive strategies?
Topic Area: HRMP
Sample Questions:
Please tell me the main HRMP used in managing your employees
Tell me about the reasons for the choice of these HRMP
What are the key influences on the choice of HRMP that are developed and implemented in your
    organisation?
Topic area: Nexus
What importance do you attribute to the linkage of Competitive Strategy and HRMP in your organisation?
How do you link competitive strategies and HRMP in your organisation?
What are the structural factors that affects the CS–HRMP linkage?
How involved are you in the process of making core decision regarding HRMP and competitive strategies
    in your organisation?
Topic area: Contextual Factors
Sample Questions:
What are the main issues that affects your ability to integrate HRMP with competitive strategies in your
    organisation?
What contextual factors affects the integration of competitive strategies and HRMP in your organisation?
Describe your experience of these influencing factors on the integration of HRMP with competitive
    strategies such as influence of government legislation and regulations, e.g labour laws
Language and cultural values
Economic changes, e.g oil price fluctuations
Educational system and Skilled Labour,
Digital changes, e.g use of internet apps
Globalization, e.g influx of foreign companies
Religious Issues, e.g religious unrest
Are there any other factors influencing the linkage (nexus) of HRMP and competitive strategies?

*****these are only guiding questions that a further probed during the interview.