

environment through strategic foresight, seize upon these opportunities and challenges, and initiate organizational transformation through strategic flexibility. Previous empirical literature on digital readiness, digitalization, and organizational performance appears fragmented and primarily applied to large business organizations and public institutions [93]. In terms of understanding the influence of digital readiness of SMEs concerning the enterprise-wide application of digitalization in their business processes, there seems to be a shortage of sufficient theoretically sound frameworks [28].

Hence, this study will contribute to the available knowledge in the field by proposing a conceptual framework that suggests a direct relationship between digital readiness and performance and indirectly through business process digitalization in the context of SMEs. In terms of the potential impact of strategic foresight and strategic flexibility on business process digitalization, several studies have investigated this relationship, primarily in the context of large enterprises with substantial resources, e.g., [94]; [95]; [95]; [96]. However, as far as SMEs are concerned, there appears to be far less academic attention on conceptualizing the influence of strategic foresight and flexibility on digitalization of business processes in SMEs, and subsequent impact on their performance. The current study addresses this research gap.

Another crucial contribution of this study is the mediation relationship proposed between the firm performance and its antecedents through integrating two theories. The first is the digital readiness theory, which examines the strategic posture of the organization, as well as the awareness and willingness (i.e., readiness) of interns to digitalize. The second theory emphasizes the firm's capabilities to respond to external changes through strategic foresight and flexibility. Although prior studies have looked at the influence of these factors on SME performance, most of the studies are fragmented and look at the relationships in isolation [48]; [83] [46].

Furthermore, some of the scholarly works have alluded to the possibility that digitalization may account for the relationship between performance and its drivers (e.g., [56]; [83]; [84]), yet an integrated framework that links the constructs together appears to have been overlooked before the current study. The propositions presented in the current research work together as a good enabler for enhancing SMEs' organizational capabilities and competencies in working with advanced digital technologies and their applications. Digitalization requires new competencies within the enterprise [2]. Hence, the proposed framework provides nuanced insights into the potentially significant drivers of digitalization and the performance of SMEs.

A. Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

This study has potential limitations. The ideas presented in this study about the potentially significant drivers of business process digitalization and its subsequent impact on the performance of SMEs are based on theoretical arguments. Hence, the propositions must be tested as hypotheses and validated with robust data. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to undertake empirical studies with the framework through appropriate quantitative methods. Furthermore, there are

possibilities that the current framework did not consider other potentially significant antecedents of digitalization, such as digital leadership, entrepreneurial orientation, and organizational ambidexterity, among others. Future scholarly efforts may consider this matter. Finally, the framework did not consider the possibility that pertinent moderators may be at play. For instance, a supportive environment, industry type, availability of skilled personnel, etc., may significantly influence the relationships between the constructs in the framework. Such possibilities may be investigated by future researchers.

IV. CONCLUSION

The idea behind presenting the conceptual framework developed in this study is to start a conversation that would draw scholarly interest towards developing a validated model to determine how the drivers of digitalization aid SMEs to begin adopting and applying digital technologies in their business activities, and how this would affect and enhance the performance of these enterprises given the dynamic business environment that is constant flux. Moreover, this conceptual framework is likely to pave the path towards developing a more robust theory that explains how digitalization and business performance of SMEs are influenced. The outcome of such research would contribute significantly to the body of knowledge in the realm of digitalization of SMEs and potentially provide crucial clues for industry practitioners to consider. For instance, key decision makers in SMEs, policymakers, and regulators who work with SME development can fine-tune their strategies and initiatives to focus on critical drivers of digitalization and the performance of SMEs.

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