



## Entrepreneurship, Learning Orientation and Export Performance: The Moderating Effect of Network Capacity and Psychic Distance

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### ABSTRACT

Based on a resource-based view and contingency-based approach, the current research investigated the link between several internal and external factors, export entrepreneurship and export performance, considering the moderating impact of psychic distance and network capacities. A random sample of 296 export managers was chosen to collect the research data, which were examined through PLS structural equation modeling. Findings demonstrated that export-learning-orientation and export entrepreneurship positively affect export performance. Moreover, export commitment and competitive intensity were the key attributes and predictors of export entrepreneurship. Psychic distance did not affect export entrepreneurship directly but had a negative moderating impact on the link between export-learning-orientation and export performance. Moreover, the moderating effect of network capacities on the link between export entrepreneurship on export performance was confirmed. Evidence from this study suggests that export entrepreneurship is multifactorial, driven by a variety of internal and external factors that are primarily contextual. Export managers of SMEs can use above findings in their decision-making and actions about the firms' export activity to enhance export performance.

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## 1. Introduction

Foreign trade, composing of exports and imports, has become increasingly widespread over the past few decades, mostly because the globalization of trade, technological advances, and changes to the global economy have all prompted various businesses to engage in cross-border operations (Safari & Saleh, 2020; Sultanuzzaman et al., 2019). It is viewed as a key driver of economic development and a critical source of foreign currency revenue that can expand the domestic markets and increase efficiency and productivity, particularly in developing economies (Zahonogo, 2016). Within this context, exportation is a key strategic choice for the growth and sustainability of businesses that have opted to start internationalizing (Navarro-García et al., 2016). Exporting is a multi-stage and multi-dimensional process of marketing and direct sale of domestically produced goods or services in a foreign market or country (Al-Maery, 2018; Zekiri, 2016) to achieve competitive advantage and to leverage long-term sustainability (Navarro-García et al., 2016). Likewise, export performance is conceptualized as the extent to which an exporting company's economic and strategic goals (e.g., revenue, profitability, and market expansion) for the export of a service or product to a foreign market are achieved. It is used to measure the success of companies in export sales (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Karedza & Govender, 2017).

Current studies in the area of international trade have identified some relevant factors that influence the export performance of manufacturing and service sector enterprises (e.g., Rua<sup>1</sup> et al., 2018; Kalinic<sup>2</sup> & Brouthers, 2022). In an attempt to better understand what variables affect the export performance of companies, researchers, for example, have underlined the influence of a variety of internal and external drivers and moderators – e.g. industry antecedents, external environmental factors such as local and foreign relations, and internal factors like organizational and managerial determinants e.g. firm size, resources and capabilities (Fernando et al., 2017; Haddoud et al., 2019; Safari & Saleh, 2020). However, most of the previous research has centered on economically developed countries where the market environment is quite stable, with no application to emerging markets (Haddoud et al., 2019; Safari & Saleh, 2020). Nonetheless, studies in the area of export performance of non-oil exporting companies in less developed and developing countries are still limited. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the factors behind their international competitiveness remains unclear. There is also a limited understanding of the relationship between export performance and its potential determinants or predictors in evolving or less developed economies (Chitauru & Khumalo, 2020; Haddoud et al., 2019). Besides, researchers have documented methodological challenges and practical barriers to the use of export approaches in different contexts and raised concerns about inconsistent and conflicting findings on the effects of various export performance determinants (Haddoud et al., 2019; Hessels & van Stel, 2011; Virvilaitė & Šeinauskienė, 2015).

Export performance becomes much more challenging by limitations on resources, lack of international expertise, little marketing experience, complicated legislation, poorly structured organizations, under-developed mechanisms facilitating multinational operations, and substantial tariff and non-tariff barriers applied to exporting firms operating from developing economies (Kazemi et al., 2019; Nejatianpour<sup>3</sup>, 2016, Torkamani and Zoghipour<sup>4</sup>, 2008). Because of these variations, further research on the drivers of export behavior and performance in developing countries is required to expand our understanding of the topic. Current export literature tends to generalize findings obtained from advanced economies to other contexts; however, the relevance of such findings may be challenged for Iranian corporate exporters (Kazemi et al., 2021). In particular, at the time of increased competition in the international market, understanding the determinants of export performance would help export owners, managers, decision-makers and researchers explore export market repositories where the export firms can find relevant information and processes to build learning capabilities for

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2. Kalinic, I., & Brouthers, K. D. (2022). Entrepreneurial orientation, export channel selection, and export performance of SMEs. *International Business Review*, 31(1), 101901.

3. Nejatianpour, A and Esmaeili, A. (2016). Analysis of the factors affecting the export of food industry products: rural development approaches. *Rural Development Strategies*, 3(11): 335-353. (Persian)

4. Torkamani, J and Zoghipour, A. (2008). Factor affecting the export supply of Iranian food industry products. *Agricultural Economics*, 2(1): 23-33. (Persian)

enhancing their export performance (Chabowski et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2012). The Iranian export industry including the food and agricultural products exporting sector has great potential for economic growth (Shemshadi<sup>1</sup>, 2021), and the investigation of its exporting firms' performance is an interesting area of research to explore.

Previous research has increasingly shown the effect of export learning orientation, entrepreneurship-driven factors and psychic/market distance on the export performance, especially in advanced economies (Assadinia et al., 2019; Gnizy et al., 2017; Ismail et al., 2019; Skarmeas et al., 2016). However, the topic is notably under-researched through SMEs operating in developing countries (Hessels & Van Stel, 2011). An exporting company to perform effectively and efficiently needs to adapt to the foreign markets, and this adaptation must be based on the knowledge of the domestic and foreign markets (economy, culture, politics, etc.) and on the differences or distances between them (Navarro-García et al., 2016). This is especially important for SMEs when entering foreign markets, given their lack of resources including knowledge (Haddoud et al., 2019). Literature in this regard noted that the higher extent of export entrepreneurship may increase export performance (e.g., Asghari and Rostami, 2017; Chen et al., 2020). However, it seems that to overcome the resource and financial limitations, SMEs need to build strong networks with their international partners to reduce their costs (McDougall et al., 2013). Accordingly, we propose that network capacities may affect the relationship between export entrepreneurship and export performance. Furthermore, we presume that the impact of export learning orientation on export performance may be affected by the psychic distance existing between the home country and the target destination.

Given the above discussions, this research seeks to enlighten the current knowledge on several theoretical grounds. Firstly, the current study generates a detailed theoretical and practical understanding of the influence of several internal and external factors on export entrepreneurship and export performance of food and agricultural product SME exporters in Iran, as a developing economy context. Relying on the contingency theory, it investigates the effect of psychic distance as a potential moderating factor in the link between export-learning-orientation and export performance, and the direct effect of psychic distance on entrepreneurship orientation which has been narrowly or differently addressed to date (Assadinia et al., 2019; Ismail et al., 2019); and finally, it investigates the moderating impact of network capacities on the link between export entrepreneurship and export performance which is not analyzed in context of SMEs through developing countries. Thus, we aim to investigate the effect of some internal factors like export learning orientation, managerial commitment and network capacities as well as some external factors including competitive intensity and psychic distance on export entrepreneurship and export performance amongst exporting food and agricultural products companies in Iran.

## **2. Literature review and Hypotheses Development**

### **2.1 Export Entrepreneurship and its predictors**

Miller (1983) and Miller and Friesen<sup>2</sup> (1983) were the first to define entrepreneur orientation, and subsequently that definition has been used and developed by many researchers across industries, countries, and cultures. In Lumpkin and Dess<sup>3</sup> (1996), entrepreneurship is defined as the process of making an entry, as well as the practice and decision-making associated with it. Similarly, export entrepreneurship is characterized as a process by which individual exporters, either on their own or in organizations, make use of sales potentials in export markets by considering available resources and influencing environmental factors (Hessels and van Stel, 2011; Santra et al., 2020). To measure export entrepreneurship, some studies consider a reflective construct, considering dimensions like risk-taking,

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1. Shemshadi, K. (2021). Investigation of the Factors Affecting Iran's Food Industry Exports: Application of Gravity Model. *Agricultural Economics and Development*, 29(3), 239-262. doi: 10.30490/aead.2021.356189.1385

2. Miller, D. (1983) 'The correlates of entrepreneurship in three types of firms', *Management Science*, Vol. 29, No. 7, pp.770-791.

Miller, D. and Friesen, P.H. (1983) 'Strategy-making and environment: the third link', *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp.221-235.

3. Lumpkin, G.T. and Dess, G.G. (1996) 'Clarifying the entrepreneurial orientation construct and linking it to performance', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp.135-172

opportunity-driven, innovativeness features (e.g., Tajeddini<sup>1</sup> and Mueller, 2012; Dess and Lumpkin 2005), and others (Navarro-García et al., 2015; 2016), like the current study, consider it as a formative construct. In current study, export entrepreneurship is defined as a formative component with three features of speed (the amount of the years taken by a firm to begin international trade), intensity (overall sales ratio) and scope (the number of international markets to which the company exports).

Authors underline the dependence of export entrepreneurship on two main clusters of internal and external determinants (e.g. Rwehumbiza & Marinov<sup>2</sup>, 2020; Navarro-García et al., 2015; 2016). Internal drivers are those involved with personal factors, export decision-makers, organizational attributes, capabilities and skills, whereas external factors include the environment in which a business operates e.g. export market determinants (Safari and Saleh, 2020; Santra et al., 2020). Depending on the type of business, these factors may stimulate or impede the export entrepreneurship of firms, directly or indirectly (Hessels and van Stel, 2011). For this study, the attitude or commitment of export managers towards exports is considered as an internal factor (firm specific) while factors in connection with the industry including competitive intensity and perceived psychic distance (environment-specific) are considered external factors affecting export entrepreneurship.

### **Management Export Commitment and export entrepreneurship**

The attitude of export head is seen as a crucial factor in companies' export performance in foreign marketplaces (Navarro et al., 2010) and contributes to their entrepreneurial orientation (Acedo and Galán, 2011). For current research, the export commitment is described as the attitude and propensity of managers to allocate monetary, human and authoritative resources to export activities and to increase their willingness to provide greater support to foreign distributors (Donthu and Kim, 1993). In turn, this willingness diminishes the perceived risks and barriers of exporting (Styles & Ambler, 2000) and enables foreign distributors to receive greater support (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994). Export commitment promotes the creation of an export-orientated culture, which can affect export speed, intensity and scope (Navarro et al., 2013). However, just few studies have shown a clear correlation between export commitment and export entrepreneurship (e.g., Navarro et al., 2016, 2015). Gonçalves<sup>3</sup> et al., (2021) also showed that leaders' commitment to exporting drives Portugal companies entrepreneurial orientation. To address this effect, the first hypothesis was proposed:

**H1:** The export commitment of management positively affects export entrepreneurship.

### **Competitive Intensity and export entrepreneurship**

Contingency factors such as external environmental factors are related to the external scope contribute to export entrepreneurship (Navarro-García, 2016). Keupp and Gassmann (2009) report that external environmental factors are divided into two categories: those related to industry and those associated with countries and individuals. competitive intensity is an industry-related factor, characterized by the degree of competition between different business competitors and reflects the hostility of the environment (Barnett, 1997).

Competitive intensity may improve market dynamism by altering the strategic resilience of the companies to respond to the changes they face (Zahra, 1993). Specifically, competitive intensity represents the increased growth of market-based behavior (Cadogan et al., 2003), and is demonstrated by a greater adaptation to the requirements and demands of international purchasers (Navarro-García et al., 2014). Because of the need to explore and leverage market prospects outside the domestic realm, the competitive intensity has a positive effect on the entrepreneurship of the exporting firms (Asghari and Rostami, 2017; Navarro-García et al., 2015). There are some studies supporting the positive impact of competitive intensity on export entrepreneurship (e.g., Navarro-García et al., 2015, 2016). However, a few opposing results suggest that the external environment, including a competitive

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1. Tajeddini, K., & Mueller, S.L. (2012). Corporate entrepreneurship in Switzerland: Evidence from a case study of swiss watch manufacturers. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 8(3), 355-372.

2. Rwehumbiza, D., & Marinov, M. A. (2020). Development of entrepreneurial orientation of export manufacturers from emerging economies. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 16(2), 667-689.

3. Gonçalves, T., Teixeira, M. S., Dias, J. G., Gouveia, S., & Correia, R. J. (2021). Commitment to exporting as an antecedent of organizational skills and firm performance. *Journal of Business Economics*, 91(7), 1063-1084.

intensity, has a low contribution to export entrepreneurship (Sri Wahyuni and Setyadi, 2016). To address this contradiction, this study proposed and examined the second hypothesis:

**H2:** Competitive intensity *positively affects* export entrepreneurship.

### **Psychic Distance and export entrepreneurship**

In this study, distance is characterized as physical, geographical or conceptual proximity between local and foreign markets/countries, whereas 'difference' is considered institutional in regulatory structures of the two markets/countries, including the cognitive and normative view of public administrations (Sousa and Lages, 2011). It also includes individual values of managers as well as financial, lawful, and socio-cultural discrepancies between the emerging and developed economies in which the exporting firms operate (Sousa and Bradley, 2006).

Psychic distance is the sum of contextual features (e.g. social, cultural, economic, political, legal or language differences between domestic and foreign markets) which impede the flow from and to the market, and thus influence the intensity, scope and speed of the export process of companies. It is widely known as a cognitive barrier that reduces the exporters' entrepreneurial orientation and gradually lowers the pace of the exporting process (Asghari & Rostami, 2017; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Santra et al., 2020; Sousa & Bradley, 2006). Accordingly, some researchers have shown that psychic distance affects export entrepreneurship negatively (e.g., Virvilaitė and Šeinauskienė, 2015) by turning export companies into more conservative in executing their marketing mix plans (Sousa and Bradley, 2009) resulting in a narrow entrepreneurship orientation, slow reduction in scope and speed of exporting (Prime et al., 2009). For example, Asghari and Rostami (2017) in their research showed that psychic distance affects export entrepreneurship negatively. Contrary to the above expectations, while some researchers have shown that there is a negative impact of psychic distance on export entrepreneurship (Virvilaitė & Šeinauskienė, 2015), some others suggest that psychic distance has a positive effect on export entrepreneurship in terms of speed, intensity and scope of export (Sousa & Lengler, 2009). Accordingly, export companies can gradually gain knowledge of international markets through "learning by doing" (i.e. incremental learning) where they enter similar countries and use their gained knowledge to target more distant markets (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). For example, Lezana Zúñiga et al., (2020) conducted a research in Chile and showed that companies that decide to sell at a high psychic distance would have a better chance of success. Yet, research related to the impact of psychic distance on export entrepreneurship in SMEs is limited and conflicting (Assadina et al., 2019; Santra et al., 2020; Virvilaitė and Šeinauskienė, 2015). We assume that, due to the limited resource of SME exporters in developing countries, it is more likely that psychic distance predicts export entrepreneurship negatively in SME exporters in Iran. Given these arguments, this study proposed the third hypothesis:

**H3:** Psychic distance negatively affects export entrepreneurship.

### **2.2 export entrepreneurship and export performance**

Export performance is highly influenced by the international scope of the export market, which is determined by the number of countries in which the exporting businesses trade (Ruzo et al., 2011). Kafouros et al. (2008), for instance, highlight that an exporting business with a wider international scope will produce more returns from innovation by using multiple markets. Therefore, the expectation is that export companies, which diversify their markets and simultaneously export their goods or services to several countries, can reach better outcomes than those of a small global scope. The academic studies also support the idea that companies whose administrators are more engaged in the quest for opportunities in international environments and tend to be more export-orientated, have more revenues and profits, and are therefore more fulfilled with their export performance than once with a less global outlook (Nemkova et al., 2012). The impact of entrepreneurial orientation on the firm performance is also supported by some studies (e.g., Amin, 2015; Monteiro et al., 2019). Some studies also acknowledge the positive impact of the export entrepreneurship orientation on the companies' export performance (Asghari and Rostami, 2017; Chen et al., 2020). For example, Navarro-García et al., (2015) showed that export entrepreneurship can predict export performance

measured by sale growth and management satisfaction. In the context of the above-mentioned literature, this study proposed the fourth hypothesis:

**H4:** Export entrepreneurship positively affects export performance.

### **2.3 Export Learning Orientation and export performance**

Assadina et al. (2019) consider export learning orientation as a type of organizational learning that focuses on learning about prospects and disputes in the export context, and as internal means needed to excel in exporting. A key advantage for successful export companies is the capability to learn about trends and circumstances of foreign markets, which may empower them to better understanding of their abilities, shortcomings, opportunities and threats (Ismail et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2012). According to the resource-based view of learning (Schilling, 2002), export-learning-orientation empowers knowledge management and information sharing among organizations to translate and disseminate complex export market data (Assadina et al., 2019; Habes et al., 2020). Export learning orientation is a potentially powerful tool in international corporate marketing strategies, which provides the basis for understanding the internationalization of the export market and facilitates increased export performance (Assadina et al., 2019; Ismail et al., 2019). Tajeddini (2009) emphasized that It is vital that decision-makers gain a comprehensive understanding of learning orientation in order to influence business performance. Assadina et al., (2019) by using multiple-informant and time-lagged primary data from 242 SMEs in a sub-Saharan African market showed that increases in export learning orientation is linked with increases in export performance. However, Kazemi et al., (2021) showed that export learning orientation decreases export performance. To address these conflicting results in-depth, the current study proposed the fifth hypothesis.

**H5:** Export learning orientation affects export performance positively.

### **2.4 Moderating impact of physical distance on the connection between export-learning-orientation and export performance**

The psychic distance is argued to have a moderating impact on the link between export-learning-orientation and export performance, largely due to the complex interplay between distance determinants including landscape, culture, and administrative insights (Sousa and Bradley, 2006). Evans and Mavondo (2002) argued that psychic distance is a major obstacle in highly competitive markets due to fragmented knowledge and learning barriers. Since learning orientation is considered as an attitudinal notion than behavioral concept, perceptual contingent factors are more likely to affect the association between export-learning-orientation and export performance. One of these perceptual influences is the perceived distance from the market (Johnston et al., 2012; Fatemi et al., 2021). With the (international and local) psychic distance widening, the entrepreneurs and export managers face several difficulties, some aggravated by absence of a joint source of information or limited comprehension of the perceived gaps between local and target markets (Johnston et al., 2012). Moreover, increased perceived socio-cultural distance can inhibit entrepreneurs and managers' comprehension of the socio-cultural ramifications of serving the target market. In these conditions, companies might find it overwhelming to convert their export-learning-orientation into higher performance (Assadina et al., 2019). The literature also suggests that in situations where export-learning-orientation has a more or less favorable effect on export performance, the perceived distance from the market may undermine the economic benefits of export-learning-orientation by companies because it interrupts the movement of accurate data, info and knowledge among the business and the export market in which it operates (Assadina et al., 2019). Such an argument gave rise to the sixth hypothesis in this study:

**H6:** An increase in the psychic distance undermines the link between export-learning-orientation and export performance.

### **2.5 Moderating impact of network capacities on the connection between export entrepreneurship and export performance**

Overall, some related studies examine the interaction between CEO entrepreneurship orientation and

organizational capacities on internationalization. For example, Yoon et al., (2018) examined whether entrepreneurial orientation may predict international performance by interacting with network capability. By analyzing 200 SMEs, Zuccehella (2002) investigated the drivers of internationalization and showed that technological capability, marketing capability, and network capability were key drivers in improving internationalization. Moreover, he noted that these organizational capabilities (including network capabilities) by interacting with the entrepreneurial orientation play a vital role in improving global performance. However, we aim to examine this relationship at the organizational level, measuring export entrepreneurship by speed, intensity, and scope dimensions. Porter (1985) mentioned that the new established SMEs which want to enter into the international market may face severe entry barriers, requiring them to set up a network with their key external stakeholders. To survive in the changing and competitive environments, SMEs with insufficient resources, in comparison with large businesses, need to enter into new global markets by building a valuable network (Lavie, 2007). Moreover, SMEs with a high extent of export entrepreneurship have an insistent attitude in pursuing new opportunities to enter new global markets and to make networks for establishing departments that execute their internationalization goals. Such export entrepreneurship plays a key role in overcoming external environment changes and boosting export performance by interacting with organizational capabilities including network capabilities (McDougall et al, 1994). Moreover, the network capability benefits exporting SMEs by decreasing transaction costs and helping them to get into vital resources such as money and information (Gulati et al., 2000), leading to a high level of export performance (Yoon et al., 2018). Thus, we proposed the following hypotheses.

**H7:** An increase in the network capacity strengthen the link between export entrepreneurship and export performance.

According to the above-mentioned hypotheses, the proposed conceptual framework is as follows:

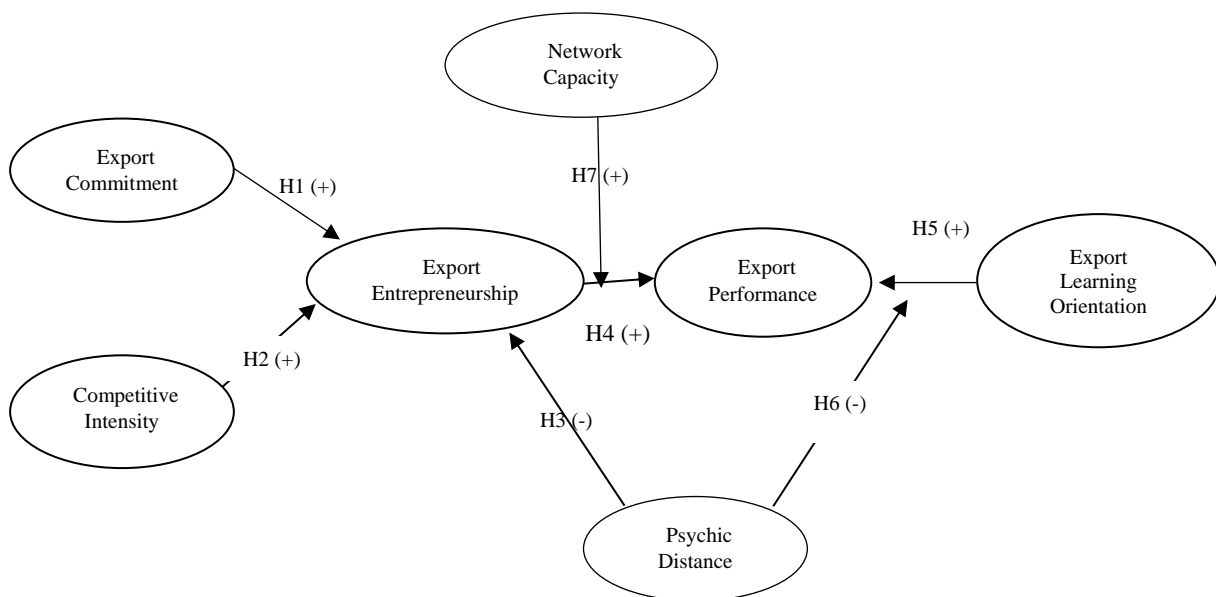


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the research

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research population and sampling method

The research population included 850 SME whose details were available from the Tehran Chamber of Commerce and the website of the 27th International Exhibition of Food and Agricultural Products (2020)<sup>1</sup>. The sample size was estimated 265 firms, using Cochran formula (p and q equal to 0.5, z equal to 1.96 and d equal to 0.01). With a 30% increase in the distribution of questionnaires, 345 questionnaires were distributed, and 310 questionnaires were received from the participants,

1. International Exhibition of Food and Agricultural Products, retrieved from: <https://www.iran-agrofood.com/iran-agro>

estimating the response rate of 89%. As presented by Hair et al. (2014) procedure, 14 questionnaires were removed from further analysis due to incomplete or indifferent answer of the participant to questions. Finally, 296 questionnaires were selected for inclusion in the data analysis. The sample unite was chosen from list of SMEs participating in the 27th International Exhibition of Food and Agricultural Products (2020), using systematic sampling method. The questionnaires were filled by export managers because they actually were the most informed person about the international policy of the company. The characteristic of companies that participated in this study is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Features of sample (N= 296)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Years of founding</b>		
Before 1990	44	14.86
1991-2015	161	54.39
After 2015	91	30.74
<b>Number of staffs</b>		
Under 20	31	10.47
21-50	68	22.97
51-100	81	27.36
101-150	83	28.04
151-200	23	0.07

Among the respondents to the questionnaire, 22.3% were women, and 77.7% were men. 24.6% of respondents were 25-35 years old, 64.5% were 35-45 years old, and 10.9% were over 45 years. Moreover, 44.9% of respondents had a bachelor's degree, 28.8% a master's degree, 23.8% a diploma or lower, and 2.7% a doctorate degree.

### 3.2 Research Measurement

Export entrepreneurship is a formative component with three features of speed (the amount of the years taken by a firm to begin international trade), intensity (overall sales ratio) and scope (the number of international markets to which the company exports) retrieved from Navarro-García et al. (2015) scale. Export performance was measured using the Hasaballah et al. (2019) nine-item scale, which contains three subscales of export satisfaction, financial export performance and sale growth. We used the Navarro-García et al. (2010) four-item scale to measure managerial export commitment. The construct of the competitive intensity scale encompasses the level/amount of rivalry among firms exporting in the market and was measured by Cadogan et al., (2012) five-item scale. The psychic distance was calculated using a six-item scale developed by Sousa and Lages (2011), primarily in accordance with the domestic and main international market distances between country features and public communities. In this study, network capability is defined as the powerful of the network bonds that assist firms to accomplish their objectives and increase export performance, measured by using five items of Yoon et al., (2018) scale. Two of the items of the competitive intensity scale, one related to the psychic distance scale and the one related to network capacity scale were removed due to low level of factor loading. All items were measured by five-point Likert scale.

Two control variables of firm size (total number of staffs) and firm age (the number of years that the company has been in the business) were considered in this study, as it is probable that larger and experienced firms are more likely to have more export performance (Gulati & Higgins 2003).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Validity and reliability of measurement model

The model was investigated using SmartPLS3 that is appropriate for research with formative construct, including this study. Three types of reliability tests were used to measure the reliability of the research instrument and reflective measurement model. These include (a) the Cronbach alpha test with values above 0.7; (b) the composite reliability test with values above 0.7; and AVE more than 0.5 construct (Hair et al., 2009). Table 2 displays the results of each reflective construct of the measurement model goodness of fit.

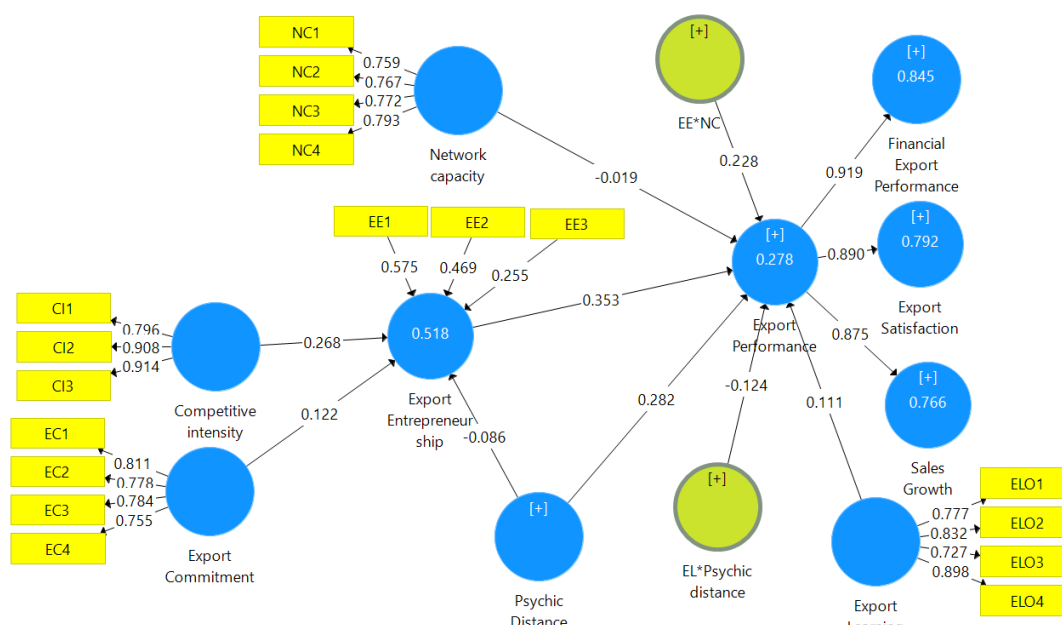


**Table 2.** The measurement model tests

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Competitive intensity (CI)	0/844	0/907	0/765
Export Commitment (EC)	0/789	0/863	0/612
Export Learning (ELO)	0/824	0/884	0/657
Export Performance	0/903	0/921	0/565
Export Satisfaction	0/711	0/838	0/634
Financial Export Performance	0/882	0/927	0/809
Network capacity	0/776	0/856	0/597
Psychic Distance	0/926	0/944	0/772
Sales Growth	0/747	0/856	0/665

**4.2 Hypothesis test**

The partial least square (PLS) modelling approach was performed for data analysis (Hair et al., 2014). Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the relationships between different components in standard and T-value mode.



**Figure 2.** PLS outcomes in standardized coefficient estimation mode

Figure 2 shows that the factor loadings of all questions measuring reflective variables are greater than 0.7, indicating that all questions appropriately evaluate their related constructs (Hair et al., 2014). The value of R<sup>2</sup> for export entrepreneurship is 0.518, indicating that export commitment and competitive intensity can predict the behavior of the export entrepreneurship variable. It also demonstrates that the R<sup>2</sup> value of export performance is 0.278, indicating that export entrepreneurship and export-learning-orientation can predict the behavior of the export performance variable in a relatively weak to moderate manner (Hair et al., 2014; Henseler et al., 2009). Table 3 displays the analysis of these research hypotheses.

**Table 3.** Analysis of the research hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	Significance (T-Value)	Path Coefficient (B)	Result
EC -> EE		2.331	0.122	Confirmed
CI ->EE		4.402	0.268	Confirmed
PD -> EE		0.993	-0.086	Rejected
EE ->EP		4.665	0.353	Confirmed
ELO ->EP		2.086	0.111	Confirmed
ELO * PD->EP		2.091	-0.124	Confirmed
EE * NC -> EP		3.720	0.228	Confirmed

EC: Export commitment, EE: Export Entrepreneurship, CI: Competitive Intensity, PD: Psychic Distance, ELO= Export Learning orientation, NC=Network Capacity

According to Table 2, management export commitment ( $\beta=0.122$ ; T-value=2.331) and competitive intensity ( $\beta=0.268$ ; T-value=4.776) affect export entrepreneurship positively. The results also show that export entrepreneurship ( $\beta=0.282$ ; T-value=4.402) and export learning orientation ( $\beta=0.111$ ; T-value=2.086) positively influence export performance. Psychic distance has a negative moderating impact on the link between export-learning-orientation and export performance ( $\beta=-0.124$ ; T-value=2.091), even though the direct effect of psychic distance on entrepreneurship orientation is rejected ( $\beta=0.993$ ; T-value=-0.086). Moreover, the moderating impact of network capacity on the relationship between export entrepreneurship and export performance was confirmed ( $\beta=0.228$ ; T-value=3.720).

## 5. Discussion and Limitations

### 5.1 Discussions of findings

Using contingency theory and the resource-based view, the current study built a conceptual model to explore seven hypotheses. The findings revealed that export commitment had a positive effect on export entrepreneurship ( $\beta=0.122$ ; T-value=2.331), thus H1 was confirmed. These results are along with the findings of the former studies which showed that export owners and managers' attitude affect the export orientation of businesses (Acedo and Galán, 2011; Lages et al., 2008). Moreover, Gonçalves et al., (2022) showed that Portugal leaders' commitment to exporting acts as an antecedent of entrepreneurial orientation. It is also consistent with those of Navarro-García (2016) who found the positive dependence of export entrepreneurship on internal factors including export commitment. It showed that the export commitment of firm managers, owners or senior executives (i.e. their attitudes towards efficient management of export-related resources) is an important predictor for the success of their companies in foreign markets and played a major contribution to their export entrepreneurship. The reason is that the managerial export commitment may decline export risks and barriers, accordingly encourages the development of an international market culture that can be decisive for firms' speed, degree, and international scope of exports (Styles & Ambler, 2000; Navarro et al., 2013).

This study found that the competitive intensity of the sector in which the export firms operate had a positive effect on export entrepreneurship, and thus H2 was verified ( $\beta=0.268$ ; T-value=4.402). This is consistent with past studies showing that export entrepreneurship depends on contingency variables associated with the external environment, including competitive intensity (Navarro-García, 2016). Competitive intensity helps companies to adapt to international marketing-mix program to satisfy foreign consumers' needs and expectations (Navarro et al., 2014). Accordingly, competitive intensity promotes the advance of market-oriented behaviors, influencing the scope and degree of companies' international orientations by increasing the need of pursuing and taking advantage of business opportunities outside of the domestic area (Mittelstaedt et al., 2006).

Surprisingly, this study found no correlation between the psychic distance and export entrepreneurship of exporting companies, and thus H3 was not confirmed ( $\beta=-0.086$ ; T-value=0.999). This is against the findings of some of the previous research that confirmed the impact of psychic distance on export entrepreneurship (e.g., Safari and Saleh, 2020; Santra et al., 2020). We discussed that psychic distance is the result of managerial perception, which does not arise in isolation and it is actually linked to other internal and external factors of the export market industry. According to Cadogan John et al. (2012), the development of constructive management values and the constant pursuit of business opportunities in international markets would help companies overcome psychic barriers to export. The perceived psychic distance is also reduced as firms gain international experience and develop the structure required for supporting proper policymaking in the international context (O'Cass and Julian, 2003). Sousa and Lages (2011) suggested that perceived psychic distances would contribute to export entrepreneurship if appropriate mechanisms are properly used to overcome them. However, in the present study, some export firms may reduce the psychic distance by learning in the process of internationalization and gaining adequate and effective international experience, but due to the limited resource of SMEs (Haddoud et al., 2019), the potential positive effects are hindered. Thus, the results of the current study showed that the psychic distance did not affect the firms' export entrepreneurship in Iranian SME exporters operating in food and agricultural products. To find the reasons behind this result, we conducted interviews with five export managers of

selected companies. For example, one of the interviewees mentioned, “Iranian SME exporters in developing countries, due to the limited financial resources, do not accept the risk of high psychic distance as a result they are too cautious to enter international markets”. Specifically, in the context of food and agricultural SMEs, it seems that due to the sanction exposed to Iranian companies, Iranian SMEs often prefer to export their products to their neighboring countries due to the decrease in the psychic distance, and there is any potential marketing planning to manage the possible market distance (Kazemi et al., 2019). Thus, due to the lack of structured marketing strategies to manage psychic distance, the psychic distance cannot be the main contributor to increasing the speed, scope, and degree of internationalization. On the other hand, the results show that the perceived psychic distance has a negative moderating impact on the link between export-learning-orientation and export performance, confirming H6 ( $\beta=-0.124$ ; T-value=2.091). This result shows that the link between export-learning-orientation and export performance is strengthened by reducing psychic distance, but weakened by increasing psychic distance. Accordingly, although the potential high psychic distance may not affect adversely on Iranian SME exporters' entrepreneurial orientation, it affects negatively their export performance by its interaction with an export learning orientation. This result is similar to those of some other research (e.g., Assadinia et al., 2019; Evans and Mavondo, 2002). It seems that, as mentioned by interviewees, the lack of a structured marketing plan to reduce the psychic distance may lead to overwhelming information which decreases the impact of learning orientation and export performance because it interrupts the movement of accurate data, info, and knowledge among the business and the export market in which it operates (Assadinia et al., 2019).

As expected, the results revealed the positive effect of export entrepreneurship (as a construct) on the companies' export performance, where H4 was established with a 90% probability ( $\beta=0.353$ ; T-value=4.665). This finding supports previous research done in this field, which links the export performance of the exporting companies to their export entrepreneurship (e.g., Asghari and Rostami, 2017; Ismail et al., 2019; Monteiro et al., 2019). For example, Monteiro et al., (2019) emphasized on the role of entrepreneurial orientation to increase export performance. In this study, we consider export entrepreneurship as a formative construct with three features of speed (the amount of the years taken by a firm to begin international trade), intensity (overall sales ratio) and scope (the number of international markets to which the company exports). The results show that it affects export performance positively. It can be said that companies can improve their export performance by increasing their own participation in international trade and by engaging in multiple markets mainly through incentive-based mechanisms (Kuivalainen et al., 2012; Recica et al., 2019).

Likewise, the current research revealed that the export learning orientation was positively related to export performance of the exporting companies, confirming H5 (t-value=2.086  $\beta=0.111$ ). This result is along with those of other research that documented the positive effect of export learning orientation on the firms' performance (e.g., Assadinia et al., 2019; Ismail et al., 2019; Kazemi et al., 2021). The orientation towards export learning would contribute to the sustainable competitive advantage for exporters as it can influence the cost, quality and profitability of the products or services exchanged (Kazemi et al., 2021). Learning oriented SMEs are more probable to be alert to external information sources, aware of instable export market demand, and develop the essential knowledge to create value for their customers (Wang, 2008). Based on the resource-based view, export-learning orientation helps firms to improve knowledge management and knowledge sharing activities (Calantone et al., 2002) to interpret and distribute complicated export market intelligence, thus, pave the reliable way for increased export performance (Assadinia et al., 2019, Ismail et al., 2019)

Finally, the positive moderating impact of external network capacities on the effect of export entrepreneurship on export performance was supported ( $\beta=0.228$ ; T-value=3.720). This result is similar to the result of the Yoon et al., (2018) study, showing the moderating impact of external network capacities on the relationship between CEOs entrepreneurship orientation and internationalization. In this regard, due to entry borders specifically international sanctions imposed on Iranian firms (Haidar, 2017), it seems that SMEs with some extent of export entrepreneurship need to build strong bonds with their international partners to be more profitable in their export. A strong network with external stakeholders can boost the connection between export entrepreneurship (the number of years taken by a firm to begin international trade, the SMEs overall sales ratio and the number of international markets to which the company exports) with export performance (Yoon et al.,

2018). Specifically, considering restrictions including limited resources, SMEs needed to consider and utilize powerful networks with external stakeholders. These network capacities may lessen the costs and risks of exporting to the target destination by providing more informational and financial support.

## **5.2 Theoretical and managerial implications**

This research contributes to the context of export performance of SMEs in some ways. By using resource base view and contingency theory, we provide some support for the conceptual premise that export performance and export entrepreneurship are driven by a variety of internal and external factors. Moreover, we consider export entrepreneurship as a reflective variable, testing the formative-reflective model, so we explain how it may affect export performance and also can be affected by other internal and external variables in the context of SMEs, which is scarce in the international business context. This study also seeks to enlighten some conflicting results of previous studies by showing how these relationships may be different in the context of SMEs in developing countries. For example, in contrast to some research (e.g., Sri Wahyuni and Setyadi, 2016), we showed that the competitive intensity affects the speed, intensity and scope of the SMEs exports positively as it increases their market dynamics to satisfy their customers' needs and desires. Moreover, we explained how network capacity may affect the relationship between export entrepreneurship and export performance, which is new in the context of the SMEs operating in emerging markets. Moreover, we explained how psychic distance can affect the link between export learning orientation and export performance, however, we could not find any relationship between psychic distance and export entrepreneurship which is in contrast with other previous studies (e.g., Asghari & Rostami, 2017; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Santra et al., 2020; Sousa & Bradley, 2006).

The findings of this study have the potential to help export owners and managers improve the scope, intensity, and speed of their exporting practices by rethinking key drivers and predictors of export entrepreneurship and making greater use of contextually congruent and adaptive export processes. The findings suggest that owners and managers of exporting companies should have a constructive attitude towards foreign markets to operationalize decisions related to export activities. Such an export commitment will allow them to accelerate their process of internationalization and market entry. Moreover, the results show that the contingency factors such as competitive intensity affect the scope, speed, and intensity of the export in SMEs. Accordingly, companies should consider this environmental factor as an opportunity to improve their market dynamism by altering the strategic resilience of the companies to respond to the changes they would face. Moreover, they should also try to be adopted to the requirements and demands of international purchasers more than their competitors do. The results additionally indicate that food and agricultural exporting firms need to develop appropriate strategies or practices to ensure that the market or psychic distance does not prevent or disturb a company's learning in an overseas setting and that the expertise gained through export learning orientation can be well converted into export performance across different markets. Taken together, these results suggest that determinants of export performance are primarily contextual, and vary in different stages of internationalization. Learning foreign markets from a distance may occur progressively as firms optimally navigate, compile, analyze, store, and exchange market information in the best possible way. Such an export learning orientation needs to be developed in food and agricultural exporting firms as a positive culture. In particular, export firms are expected to develop and use training programs to share knowledge and develop a culture of learning. This will allow exporters to realize the importance of shared knowledge and make use of this knowledge to gain a competitive advantage over other rivals. Moreover, as the interviewees mentioned, having international marketing planning may be important to manage the potential psychic distance and benefit from it. Moreover, to have better export performance, SMEs needed to build a strong bond with their international partners to reduce the uncertainty of failure in the international market due to their limited resources. This study confirmed this argument empirically. Thus, considering limitations including insufficient resources, SMEs CEOs should pay attention to building strong and useful networks with their external stakeholders in order to increase their international performance.

## **5.3 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

There is some limitation in this study. We consider some external and internal variables predicting

export entrepreneurship, but there are certainly other variables not examined in this research. Further researchers can analyze the effect of other related factors including environmental dynamics, degree of internationalization, resources, and other organizational capacities. Moreover, technological factors also can be considered as a determinant of export entrepreneurship by other researchers. This research was conducted in the context of SMEs in the food and agricultural companies, thus the model can be reexamined by other researchers in different contexts and the results can be compared with this study. The results of the current study show that export entrepreneurship and export learning orientation can predict export performance. As export performance is a multi-dimensional construct, it is recommended to consider these effects on financial performance, export satisfaction, strategic performance, and sale growth separately. The current study considers export entrepreneurship as a formative variable by measuring the scope, intensity, and speed of export; however, other researchers can examine the model by considering this component as a reflective variable, measuring CEO entrepreneurial orientation with dimensions like innovativeness, proactive and risk-taking behaviors. According to the results of this study, psychic distance does not have a significant relationship with entrepreneurial marketing. One of the reasons may be the lack of an international marketing plan for reducing the psychic distance, which was mentioned by interviewees. Thus, further research can be conducted to investigate the moderating impact of the international marketing plan on the relationship between psychic distance and entrepreneurial marketing.

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