

Internationalisation and international marketing: export behaviour, international marketing strategy and export performance in Spanish small and medium-sized enterprises

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Abstract

The present dissertation aims to contribute to the international business and marketing literature by shedding light on the export behaviour and performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), in the Spanish geographical context, which represents one of the European settings characterised by high SMEs density and workforce employed by these enterprises. Spain's economic growth is vastly dependent on the results of the export activity. In spite of their relevance, there is a scarcity of research in the SME export centred literature, within the Spanish context, thus it becomes apparent that more investigations should be carried out in this particular setting.

In this sense, the present study identifies and proposes for further analysis the following topics of increased importance for SMEs' export activity and performance: 1) The role played by managerial characteristics and perceptions in determining export involvement and expansion; 2) The influence the internal and external determinants have on objective export performance and satisfaction with export performance and the potential impact of certain dimensions of export performance on other export performance dimensions; 3) The influence the standardisation/adaptation of the overall international marketing strategy has on objective export performance and satisfaction with export performance, simultaneously investigating how this relationship is moderated by certain internal and external determinants.

Theoretical support is provided by several approaches: the gradualist approach to the internationalisation phenomenon, the Resource Based View (RBV) applied in the international context, the network theory and the contingency approach to the international marketing strategy. Both qualitative (Chapter 1) and quantitative (Chapter 2 and 3) methodologies have been combined for the completion of this dissertation. By employing the qualitative methodology based on in-depth case studies profound understanding of the internationalisation process in Spanish SMEs was gained. Consequently, a structured questionnaire was developed for further carrying out the quantitative study.

Data was collected through an online survey addressed to the decision maker in charge of the export activity in Spanish SMEs. For empirically treating the quantitative data univariate and multivariate analysis with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) - Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) were performed.

The results show that, concurring with the RBV, decision maker's role, particularly his/her international outlook appears to be crucial for SME's export activity. Nevertheless, the influence of certain managerial characteristics and perceptions seems to be more prominent according to the internationalisation stage or to have a stronger impact on some export performance indicators. The findings also reveal the existence of a positive relationship between the objective export performance (export intensity and the number of export markets and zones) and the subjective export performance (managerial satisfaction with export position, export profitability and new market entry), relationship that to the best of our knowledge has not been explored before. Moreover, the empirical results display that

successful export performance could be achieved by employing either a more standardised or a more adapted overall level of the international marketing strategy. Standardisation and adaptation should not be considered, in isolation, as pure strategies, but rather should be understood from a contingency perspective which suggests a balance between the standardisation and the adaptation of international marketing strategy would lead to increased export performance. This study identified three internal and external contingent variables, namely the size of the firm, the technological intensity of the industry and the environmental factors, that moderate the relation established between the overall international marketing strategy and export performance, measured both in an objective and a subjective manner.

Regarding the implications for practitioners, decision makers should be aware that, presently, due to rapid technological development along with the removal of various trade barriers, entering overseas markets is not bearing as much risk as it used to in the past, while representing a viable alternative for firm's growth and pursuit of higher profits. The fundamental role in improving objective export performance is played by their own foreign language skills, international business knowledge and firm's commitment to exporting, hence efforts should be directed towards acquiring these abilities as well as devoting resources to the export operations, in a systematic and organised manner. Therefore, policy initiatives should also aim at enhancing the development of decision maker's international outlook with a view to successfully formulating and putting into practice internationalisation strategies.

As future research directions it would be interesting to replicate similar studies in distinct geographical contexts, so the results could be generalised to larger populations. Longitudinal analysis should also be conducted, thus complex constructs such as the degree of international orientation of the decision maker, the standardisation/adaptation of the international marketing strategy or the export performance could be analysed from a time-based perspective, allowing for the investigation of composite cause-effect relationships.