

THE EFFECT OF DYNAMIC CAPABILITIES ON INNOVATIVE CAPABILITY
AND EXPORT PERFORMANCE: THE MODERATING ROLE OF EXPORTER-
IMPORTER RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

ZURINA BINTI SAMSUDIN

PTTA UTHM
PERPUSTAKAAN TUNKU TUN AMINAH

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PRESTASI EKSPORT: PERANAN PENYEDERHANA KONFLIK HUBUNGAN
PENGEKSPORT-PENGIMPOR**

ZURINA BINTI SAMSUDIN



PTTA UTHM
PERPUSTAKAAN TUNKU TUN AMINAH

**TESIS YANG DIKEMUKAKAN UNTUK MEMPEROLEH
IJAZAH DOKTOR FALSAFAH**

**FAKULTI EKONOMI DAN PENGURUSAN
UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA
BANGI
2023**

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

28 May 2023

ZURINA BINTI SAMSUDIN
P88995



PTTA UTHM
PERPUSTAKAAN TUNKU AMINAH

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ABSTRAK

Pengantarabangsaan perusahaan kecil dan sederhana (PKS) telah menjadi sektor ekonomi dunia yang rancak dan dinamik akibat liberalisasi perdagangan. Sebab pengembangan PKS ke pasaran merentas sempadan adalah untuk mengekalkan kelebihan daya saing. Kajian terdahulu telah menekankan kepentingan persekitaran perniagaan global kepada prestasi PKS. Persekitaran perniagaan global menjadi lebih dinamik dan bergelora; oleh itu, tidak dapat dinafikan bahawa PKS sedang menghadapi cabaran global. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian tentang bagaimana prestasi eksport dicapai dalam persekitaran perniagaan yang dinamik masih tidak lengkap. Firma perlu menyepadukan, membina dan mengkonfigurasi semula kecekapannya seperti keupayaan orientasi pasaran, keupayaan penyerapan dan keupayaan penyesuaian untuk berjaya bersaing dalam persekitaran yang berubah dengan pantas. Oleh itu, kajian ini mengguna pakai teori keupayaan dinamik kerana keupayaan dinamik membenarkan firma untuk mengkonfigurasi semula sumber dalaman dan luaran yang mencipta sumber baharu seperti keupayaan inovatif sebagai pembolehubah pengantara dan membantu meningkatkan prestasi terutamanya untuk mengeksport PKS. Tinjauan soal selidik telah dihantar kepada PKS Malaysia yang terlibat dalam pasaran eksport, dan 124 soal selidik pemulangan telah dianalisis menggunakan SMART PLS dan SPSS V29 untuk menguji hipotesis. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa terdapat hubungan langsung antara prestasi eksport dan keupayaan inovatif, serta keupayaan orientasi pasaran dan keupayaan penyesuaian. Walau bagaimanapun, tiada hubungan ditemui untuk keupayaan penyerapan. Kajian ini juga menguji hubungan pengantara keupayaan inovatif dan hubungan penyederhana konflik hubungan pengeksport-pengimport juga diuji, dan didapati signifikan untuk keupayaan penyerapan terhadap keupayaan inovatif. Kajian ini menambah kepada badan pengetahuan dengan mengkaji keupayaan dinamik faktor, pengantara, dan pembolehubah penyederhana ke dalam satu model komprehensif. Dari perspektif teori, penemuan mencadangkan bahawa keupayaan dinamik dan teori pertukaran hubungan memudahkan PKS membina kelebihan daya saing dan mencapai prestasi eksport yang lebih tinggi. Kajian ini berjaya menghasilkan pengetahuan baharu dan oleh itu menyelidik kebaharuan dengan meningkatkan pemahaman kita tentang hubungan pengeksport-pengimport dalam perspektif keupayaan dinamik. Secara khusus, penemuan pengaruh penyederhanaan konflik hubungan ke atas interaksi antara keupayaan dan prestasi eksport adalah baru. Dari perspektif praktikal, penemuan mencadangkan keperluan untuk membina hubungan pengeksport-pengimport untuk meningkatkan keupayaan inovatif dan kepentingan kebolehsuaian dan keupayaan inovatif kepada PKS di Malaysia. Penemuan ini juga boleh digunakan oleh kerajaan dan pembuat dasar untuk menyesuaikan dasar berkenaan PKS. Implikasi praktikal kajian menunjukkan bahawa keupayaan inovatif dan keupayaan penyesuaian sebagai bahan utama untuk PKS Malaysia mencapai prestasi eksport yang lebih baik.

ABSTRACT

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have become a vibrant and dynamic sector of the world economy due to trade liberalization. The reason for SME expansion into cross border market is to sustain competitive advantage. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of global business environment to the SMEs performance. The global business environment is becoming more dynamic and turbulent; therefore, it is undeniable that SMEs are facing global challenges. However, research on how export performance is achieved in dynamic environment is still incomplete. Firm needs to integrate, build, and reconfigure its competences such as market orientation capability, absorptive capability, and adaptive capability in order to successfully compete in rapidly changing environment. Therefore, this study adopts dynamic capabilities theory because dynamic capability permits the firms to reconfigure internal and external resources that create new resources such as innovative capability as mediating variable and assist to improve performance especially for exporting SMEs. The relational exchange is tended to be treated mostly as a research background, and not getting much attention in explaining firms' strategic behaviour and export performance. Questionnaire survey were sent to Malaysian SMEs involved in export market, and 124 return questionnaires were analysed using SMART PLS and SPSS V29 to test the hypotheses. The results indicated that there is a direct relationship between export performance and innovative capability, as well as market orientation capability and adaptive capability. However, no relationship was found for absorptive capability. This study also tests the mediating relationship of innovative capability and moderating relationship of exporter-importer relationship conflict were also tested, and it was found significant for absorptive capability towards innovative capability. This study adds to the body of knowledge by examining the factor dynamic capability, mediating, and moderating variable into one comprehensive model. From the theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that dynamic capability and relational exchange theory facilitate the SMEs to build competitive advantage and achieve greater export performance. This study manages to produce new knowledge and therefore research novelty by improving our understanding of exporter-importer relationship in the perspective of dynamic capability. Specifically, the findings of the moderating influence of relationship conflict on the interaction among capabilities and export performance is novel. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest the need to build exporter-importer relationships to enhance innovative capabilities and the importance of adaptability and innovative capabilities to SME in Malaysia. These findings can also be used by governments and policy makers to adjust policies regarding SMEs. The practical implications of the study indicate that innovative capability and adaptive capability as the main ingredients for Malaysian SMEs to achieve better export performance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
DECLARATION		iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT		iv
ABSTRAK		v
ABSTRACT		vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS		vii
LIST OF TABLES		xi
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS		xiii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS		xiv
CHAPTER I	INTRODUCTION	
1.1	Background of the Study	1
1.2	Problem Statement	4
1.3	Research Questions	11
1.4	Research Propositions	11
1.5	Research Objectives	13
1.6	Operational Definition	13
	1.6.1 Small and Medium Enterprises	13
	1.6.2 Export Performance	14
	1.6.3 Innovativeness and Innovative Capability	14
	1.6.4 Dynamic Capabilities	14
	1.6.5 Market Orientation Capability	14
	1.6.6 Absorptive Capability	15
	1.6.7 Adaptive Capability	15
	1.6.8 Exporter-importer Relationship Conflict	15
1.7	Significance and Contribution of Study	15
	1.7.1 Theoretical Contribution	16
	1.7.2 Managerial Contribution	17
1.8	Organization of Remaining Chapters	18
CHAPTER II	LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.1	Introduction	19
2.2	Export	19
	2.2.1 Export Performance	20

2.3	Theories	23
	2.3.1 Dynamic Capability Theory	24
	2.3.2 Relational Exchange Theory	27
2.4	Firms Dynamic Capabilities	30
	2.4.1 Market Orientation Capability	30
	2.4.2 Absorptive Capability	33
	2.4.3 Adaptive Capability	35
	2.4.4 Innovative Capability	38
2.5	Relational Exchange	41
	2.5.1 Exporter-importer Relationship Conflict	42
2.6	Hypotheses	47
	2.6.1 Direct Effect Hypotheses:	47
	2.6.2 Mediating Effect	51
	2.6.3 Moderating Effect	54
2.7	Conceptual Model	59
2.8	Chapter Summary	62
 CHAPTER III STUDY CONTEXT		
3.1	Introduction	63
3.2	Malaysian Economy	63
3.3	Manufacturing Sector in Malaysia	65
3.4	Small and Medium Enterprises	67
	3.4.1 Definition of SMEs	68
	3.4.2 Sectoral Composition and Geographical Distribution	69
	3.4.3 Contribution of SMEs in Malaysia	70
3.5	Chapter Summary	71
 CHAPTER IV RESEARCH METHODOLOGY		
4.1	Introduction	72
4.2	Research Design	72
4.3	Research Plan	73
4.4	Sample of Study	74
	4.4.1 Unit of Analysis	74
	4.4.2 Key Informants	74
	4.4.3 Population of Study	75
	4.4.4 Sampling Frame	76
	4.4.5 Sampling Design	77
	4.4.6 Sampling Size	77

4.5	Data Collection Method	78
4.6	Questionnaire Development	80
	4.6.1 Questionnaire Format	80
	4.6.2 Scaling	82
	4.6.3 Pre-testing	83
4.7	Sample Collection Procedure	85
4.8	Operationalization of Research Construct	86
	4.8.1 Market Orientation Capability	86
	4.8.2 Absorptive Capability	87
	4.8.3 Adaptive Capability	88
	4.8.4 Innovative Capability	89
	4.8.5 Exporter-importer Relationship	89
	4.8.6 Export Performance	91
4.9	Data coding and editing	91
	4.9.1 Missing Value	92
4.10	Non-Respond Bias	92
4.11	Statistical Analysis	93
	4.11.1 Statistical Analysis Using SPSS	93
	4.11.2 Statistical Analysis Using Partial Least Square- Structural Equation Model	93
	4.11.3 Measurement Model Assessment	95
	4.11.4 Structural Model Estimation	97
	4.11.5 Moderation Analysis	98
	4.11.6 Mediation Analysis	98
4.12	Chapter Summary	98
CHAPTER V DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS		
5.1	Introduction	99
5.2	Data Screening	99
	5.2.1 Missing Data Analysis	100
	5.2.2 Outlier Data Analysis	101
	5.2.3 Normality Data Analysis	101
	5.2.4 Multicollinearity Data Analysis	102
	5.2.5 Response Bias Analysis	103
5.3	General Profile of Respondents	104
5.4	Descriptive Analysis	110
5.5	Testing Goodness of Data	112
	5.5.1 Measurement Model	112
	5.5.2 Structural Model	120
5.6	Hypotheses Testing	123

	5.6.1	Direct Effect Hypotheses	123
	5.6.2	Mediating Effect Hypotheses	124
	5.6.3	Moderating Effect Hypotheses	126
5.7		Summary of Hypotheses Testing	128
5.8		Chapter Summary	130
CHAPTER VI DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION			
6.1		Introduction	131
6.2		Overview of the Study	131
6.3		Discussion of the Results	132
	6.3.1	Research Question 1	132
	6.3.2	Research Question 2	138
6.4		Research Implications	140
	6.4.1	Theoretical Implications	140
	6.4.2	Practical Implications	142
6.5		Limitation and Future Research	146
6.6		Chapter Summary	147
REFERENCES			149
APPENDICES			
Appendix A		Innovativeness and Export Performance	198
Appendix B		Innovative Capability And Export Performance	206
Appendix C		Determinants of Export Performance	214

LIST OF TABLES

Table No.		Page
Table 3.1	Gross Output, Value Added and Employment for Selected Years, 1959-2017	66
Table 3.2	Definition of Malaysian SMEs by Category and Size	68
Table 3.3	Number of Establishment by Firm Size in 2021	69
Table 4.1	Measurement Items for Market Orientation Capability	87
Table 4.2	Measurement Items for Absorptive Capability	88
Table 4.3	Measurement Items for Adaptive Capability	88
Table 4.4	Measurement Item for Innovative Capability	89
Table 4.5	Measurement Item for Functional Conflict	90
Table 4.6	Measurement Items for Dysfunctional Conflict	90
Table 4.7	Measurement Items for Export Performance	91
Table 5.1	Results of Missing Data Analysis	100
Table 5.2	Univariate Outlier Detection	101
Table 5.3	Output of Skewness and Kurtosis Calculation	102
Table 5.4	Results of Multicollinearity Data Analysis	103
Table 5.5	Non-response Bias Analysis	104
Table 5.6	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Years of Operation	104
Table 5.7	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Number of Full Time Employees	105
Table 5.8	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Gender	106
Table 5.9	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Type of Position	106
Table 5.10	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Type of Business	106
Table 5.11	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Type of Ownership	107
Table 5.12	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Sales Turnover for the last 24 Months	107

Table 5.13	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Number of Export Countries	108
Table 5.14	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Export Value in Percentage	109
Table 5.15	Malaysian SME's Exporter: Industry Sector	110
Table 5.16	Descriptive Analysis of Instruments	110
Table 5.17	Results of Convergent Validity Testing	114
Table 5.18	Results of Discriminant Validity Testing (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)	116
Table 5.19	Results of Discriminant Validity Testing (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio -HTMT)	117
Table 5.20	Results of Discriminant Validity Testing (Cross-Loadings)	118
Table 5.21	Results of Reliability Testing	120
Table 5.22	Results of Coefficient of Determinations (R^2)	121
Table 5.23	Results of Effect Size (f^2)	122
Table 5.24	Results of Predictive Relevance (Q^2)	123
Table 5.25	Direct Effect Results	124
Table 5.26	Mediating Effect Results	125
Table 5.27	Moderating Effect Results	127
Table 5.29	Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results	128
Table 6.2	Results of Importance-Performance Matrix Analysis (IPMA)	142

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure No.		Page
Figure 1.1	Research Conceptual Model	12
Figure 2.1	Conceptual Model of Dynamic Capabilities and Institutional Environment	59
Figure 3.1	SMEs by State	70
Figure 5.1	Measurement Model (Outer Model)	113
Figure 5.2	Structural Model (Inner Model)	121
Figure 5.3	Summary of Hypotheses Testing	129
Figure 6.1	Importance-Performance Map Grid	143



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
MNEs	Multinational Enterprises
RBV	Resources Based View
MATRADE	Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation
FMM	Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The world economy has experienced significant global phenomena in response to trade liberalization initiative in many countries (Buckley & Strange 2015; Liu et al. 2021), and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have become a vibrant and critical sector of the world economy (Qalati et al. 2020). One of the global phenomena is SMEs internationalization, and this phenomena have become more common in recent years since the past few decades (Ribau et al. 2018; Yan et al. 2018). Especially in the current business environment, SMEs are thrust to venture into international market (Harris & Moffatt 2011; Kalinic & Brouthers 2022) and development of technology that greatly facilitate cross borders trade (Osano 2019).

There are many drivers of SME internationalization. Among the main drivers of the internationalization of SMEs are globalization of world market (Njinyah 2018). The main reason for SME expansion into cross border market are to pursue new business opportunity and to improve competitive advantage (Aulakh et al. 2000; Kiran et al. 2013) as well as to achieving profitability. Therefore, the business venture of the SMEs into international market has become an important strategic agenda among managers and chief executive officer (CEO) of SMEs as well as topic of research among scholars particularly when international expansion has been positively correlated with performance (Prange & Pinho 2017).

In term of internationalization process, export is the most common mode of foreign market entry for SMEs (Martineau & Pastoriza 2016; Vanninen et al. 2022). This is due to the fact that SMEs have limited resources such as financial, personnel,

or managerial time (Knight & Cavusgil 2022) and as a result limit the choice of entry mode, especially those in emerging market (Manolopoulos et al. 2018). Therefore, more often than not SMEs choose less capital intensive mode of foreign market entry namely exporting (Agndal & Chetty 2007). In addition, exporting is the most favourable mode of entry strategy for SMEs internationalization is because of the lower risk and more flexible in targeting international market (Leonidou & Katsikeas 2010; Morgan & Katsikeas 1997).

Notwithstanding the internationalization of SMEs through exporting can help to strengthen the market presence of the firm in foreign countries, prior studies has also highlighted the importance of global business environment to the SMEs performance (Ibidunni et al. 2020; Ogundana et al. 2019). The global business environment is becoming more dynamic and turbulent, therefore it is undeniable that SMEs are facing global challenges (Lu & Beamish 2001; Oliveira & Teixeira 2011). Literature suggests that within this environment firm factors that are linked to firm's dynamic capabilities lead to superior performance in international market (Evers 2011; Pangerl 2013; Teece 2014). Dynamic capabilities are defined as distinct strategic organizational activities create value for companies in a dynamic environment by transforming resources into value-creating approaches (Santa-Maria et al. 2022). The literature also describes the global business environment that is dynamic, turbulent, and rapidly change (Schoemaker et al. 2018) characterised by increasing uncertainty and changing technology (Matic 2022). In addition, the globalization of the world market has created more competitive environment especially from big multinational enterprises (MNEs). The dynamic environment has created pressure to the SMEs to adapt to the changing environment (Terang Jaya et al. 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for the SMEs to being able to respond to the global market environment for the survival (Dominguez & Mayrhofer 2017; Gupta & Barua 2016).

Several studies have reviewed literature on export since 1978. The first review is by Aaby and Slater (1989) who reviewed 55 studies. This is followed by Zou and Stan (1998) 50 studies. Sousa et al. (2008) 52 studies and the recently Chen et al. (2016) 124 studies. Based on these review, most of the existing studies were done

from the perspective of developed countries. However, the review of studies published between 2006 and 2014 by Chen et al. (2016) indicated an increasing number of developing countries in other geographical areas especially China and African continents, including studies conducted in Malaysia by Yeoh (2014) that investigated the SMEs export performance of entrepreneurial family.

Based on the literature, resource-based view (RBV) is the most accepted theory (Davis & Dewitt 2021; Freeman et al. 2021). However, in responding to the current market environment of international business which is highly dynamic, complex and unpredictable, the concept of dynamic capabilities is seen to be the most appropriate framework for SMEs to adjust and reconfigure the firm level of resources (Ambrosini & Bowman 2009; Hassani & Mosconi 2022; Teece et al. 1997; Winter 2003) in order to develop and remain competitive ability (Efrat et al. 2018). Dynamic capabilities allow SMEs to adapt to the market dynamism by becoming more flexible and less predetermined (Eisenhardt & Martin 2000). In other words, the external environment of the market plays a crucial role in determining the capabilities of the firm so as to be dynamic and in line with the external context (Efrat et al. 2018).

Previous research argues that the decision to export also relies on internal resources and capabilities that SMEs have whereby these factors eventually shape the innovation pattern hence influence the export performance (Antonelli et al. 2013; Gkypali et al. 2012). In other words, innovation pattern is the reflection of the firm's innovative capability (Makri et al. 2017) that affects export performance.

Apart from dynamic capabilities, relational perspective is also useful in enhancing the understanding of SMEs internationalization in dynamic and changing international markets. Relational perspective explains the idea that the relationship between exporter and importer is based on cooperation and non-economic satisfaction, which leads to long-term relationships (Dwyer et al. 1987). When exporters and importers perform their roles well, the performance of the SME in the global market can be increased (Piercy et al. 1997), especially in the volatile and changing business environment. In this case, we conceptualize relationship conflict between exporter and importer based on functional and dysfunctional conflict because conflict between

exporter and importer is essential in order to encourage both parties to generate innovative ideas (Dougherty 1992; Leonard-Barton & Straus 1997). Furthermore, the necessary leadership among exporter and importer can generate strong innovation that focus on the firm's strategy (Liu et al. 2012).

In a nutshell, export is the most accepted mode of internationalization entry strategy for SMEs because its require less resource commitment and provide strategic and organizational flexibility (Miocevic & Morgan 2018), hence export strategy is the best alternative for SMEs in entering international market (Ferreras-Mendez et al. 2019). However, research on internationalization of SMEs in export context is understudied as compared to larger firms (Gonzalez-Perez et al. 2016). Hence more studies need to be done from the perspective of emerging market such as Malaysia. Additionally, manufacturing sectors have a higher tendency to export for SMEs (Nguyen & Le 2018), hence further studies on this sector is recommended.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In today business environment, the competition is high due to globalization (Chumpong et al. 2020; Linan et al. 2019). SMEs are increasingly experiencing external pressures to become more viable, while adjusting with intense competition as a result of globalization and technological improvement (Ikram et al. 2021). Therefore, SMEs need to pay attention on how they can develop and maintain competitiveness (Bakar et al. 2015). For SMEs, the superior performance in export market leads to profitability as the result of competitive advantage the SMEs has over their competitor and this is a fundamental factor that can ensure the survival and long-term success of SMEs (Nguyen et al. 2021). Export is the most rapid and beneficial methods of entering global market (Brache & Felzensztein 2019; Mansion & Bausch 2020), therefore achieving superior export performance is the ultimate objective of the SMEs.

In previous review of export performance, the study on the export performance is still under maturity and indicate mix findings (Chen et al. 2016; Gupta & Chauhan 2021). Research also indicates that the studies on export performance is drawing

increasing attention. However, the research on how export performance is achieved in dynamic market environment is insufficiently explained (Khan & Khan 2021; Villar et al. 2014). Based on the literature, dynamic capabilities permits the firms to build, extend, and rebuild organizational resources and operational capabilities (Schilke et al. 2018; Teece 2007), especially for the exporting SMEs (Boso et al. 2019; Hughes et al. 2019; Miocevic & Morgan 2018) that have limited resources. They can develop and encourage the configuration of the resources in the dynamic environment that enable SMEs to response aggressively to the challenges force by such environment (Golgeci et al. 2019). The dynamic business environment has been largely classified as critical factor for SMEs performance (Ibidunni et al. 2020; Ogundana et al. 2019). However, the influence of external business environment has been largely ignored and received minimal attention especially from developing countries perspective (Ibidunni et al. 2021). Dynamic capabilities theory alone are not sufficient in explaining the performance of the SMEs (Chen et al. 2016), therefore this study together with relational exchange theory are used as a theoretical foundation in explaining SMEs export performance.

Dynamic capabilities is recognized as important element for firm in achieving superior performance especially in international business (Teece 2013) where firms are unprotected to the effect of the globalization, and the performance of the firm is relied to the ability to discover opportunities, and increase innovation to compete in international environment (Efrat et al. 2018). In the environment that is competitive, unpredictable and dynamic, firm need to integrate, build, and reconfigure external and internal expertise in order to compete in rapidly changing environment (Teece et al. 1997).

One of the element to compete in the dynamic environment is managing and transforming firm's knowledge by developing absorptive capability to improve firms performance (Miroshnychenko et al. 2020). Adaptive capability is also one of the important element in dynamic environment because this capability allow the firm to identify and take advantage of the market opportunities (Pervan et al. 2017) by analysing the changes of the market needs. Therefore firms also need to be market

oriented because globalization caused the customer to be better informed, updated and generally more demanding (Knight & Cavusgil 2004).

According to Eisenhardt and Martin (2000), dynamic capabilities is not necessarily improving firm performance, but the reconfiguration of the internal and external resources that create new resource configuration can assist to improve performance. Dynamic capabilities helps in the development of new capabilities as response to the changing environment that can influence performance (Ferreira et al. 2020). Moreover, innovative capability is the capability of the firm to create new products (Wang & Ahmed 2007) based on the reconfiguration of internal and external resources. However, Malaysian SMEs have given less attention to the innovation activity and has impacted innovation success rate of Malaysian SMEs to decrease (Abdul-Halim et al. 2018). This is supported by the Global Innovation Index (GII) 2019 when the Malaysia's position of innovation remain unchanged- ranked 35th in 2019, 32nd in 2015, and 33rd in 2014 ((Mastic). 2019). It certainly indicate that the issue of innovation and the lack of innovative capability among Malaysian SMEs to reconfigure their internal resources has impacted their performance (Ramdan et al. 2022). Despite the increasing number of theoretical and empirical studies on dynamic capabilities, the finding on the importance of the dynamic capabilities towards firm performance is still ambiguous (Pezeshkan et al. 2016; Weaven et al. 2021) and has an impact to empirical research (Burisch & Wohlgemuth 2016; Pundziene et al. 2021). Furthermore, most of the literature on dynamic capabilities consists of descriptive studies, and limited on the empirical evidence (Grimaldi et al. 2013; Inan & Bititci 2015). Majority of the empirical evidence is based on case studies (Protogerou et al. 2012; Sternad et al. 2013). Therefore, calling for further investigation especially empirical studies that focus on quantitative approaches which can provide more academic evidence to this concept especially for developing countries.

Based on previous literature searching on the relevant construct of dynamic capabilities as mentioned above, the study that integrate all constructs such as market orientation capability, absorptive capability, adaptive capability, and innovative capability into dynamic capability configuration towards export performance into one comprehensive framework is yet to be investigated. Despite of the fact that not all of

them has been widely study towards innovative capability, but the impact towards export performance remains unknown. This study supported previous researchers that argued the impact of dynamic capabilities on firm performance is indirect with the roles of mediating factor of the firm's operational capabilities (Falahat et al. 2020; Pundziene et al. 2021), which is innovative capability. In addition, the study on the impact of innovative capability to export performance indicated mixed results (Tsai & Yang 2013) and have not reached a consensus on the nature of the relationship (Park et al. 2017), therefore the issue is still under debating (Gkypali et al. 2015).

Furthermore, in the context of emerging market the study on the role of innovative capability is limited and the focus is more towards develop country (Bortoluzzi et al. 2018). Therefore the findings of innovative capability of develop country may not be relevant for emerging market context (Ismail et al. 2018). The review on past studies on innovative capabilities or innovativeness to export performance indicated that innovative capabilities has been used mostly as independent variable and dependent variable as well as moderating variable and mediating variable in regards to export performance. Appendix B outline the details of the past studies.

In this study, market orientation capability, absorptive capability, adaptive capability, and innovative capability are the elements in dynamic capabilities that explain the internal factors for the firm success. These internal factors of dynamic capabilities employ current resources available in the firm and create new resources and capabilities and align with the changes in the environment (Du & Kim 2021; Pervan et al. 2017). The dynamic environment in which the firms operates inclusive of the community or the organization (Teece 2007; Wu et al. 2020) such as exporter and importer may enhance the inter-firm performance. In this study, we include external factors which is exporter-importer relationship conflict together with internal factors from dynamic capabilities to explain firm performance because internal factors alone (dynamic capabilities) are not directly influence performance but the configuration of the resources affected by dynamic capabilities in the changing environment (Eisenhardt & Martin 2000).

In the export context where the global environment is volatile and unpredictable, firms tend to overlook that a continuous performance depends on repeat orders derived from their local success of representative in export market (Leonidou et al. 2006; Mota et al. 2021) which we refer as importer. Therefore, we include exporter-importer relationship conflict to identify the external factor from relational perspective and the influence on dynamic capabilities. Despite the previous literature has investigated the importance of relationship to innovative capabilities, there is still limited understanding that analyse the moderating effect of relationship-level characteristics (Obul et al. 2020). In addition, inadequate studies on the export relational model limited the understanding on how the firms can increase performance because the firm's performance is not only rely on the firm resources but also benefit from the relationship (Obadia & Vida 2011) between exporter-importer relationship conflict. Since the external environment is volatile, external factors influence the relationship between firm capabilities and export performance (Chen et al. 2016), therefore, there is a non-linear relationship between firm capabilities and export performance. The roles of relational exchange between exporter and importer as moderating variable assist us to understand the external factors in export market that can assist in the development of innovative capability, therefore increasing export performance. Furthermore, the relationship between exporter and importer can create advantages and unique business opportunity (Lavie 2006; Leckie et al. 2017). In doing so, this study moves forward from norms and implement and integrating the construct from dynamic capability theory and relational exchange theory in explaining SMEs export performance.

The relational exchange between exporter-importer relationships conflict is the factor to examine, and conflict is the aspect to characterize this relationship because of the interdependence between exporter and importer can trigger conflict since both parties have certain tasks to complete (Gaski 1984; Palmatier et al. 2013). Furthermore, conflict is unavoidable and always occur in relational exchange (Dwyer et al. 1987). Moreover, conflict can easily happen in the relationship between exporter-importer especially during decision making process (Prasad & Junni 2017) which can influence export performance. Therefore, the integration of conflict in exporter and importer relational exchange perspective enlightens the understanding of

the exporter-importer relationship in export market that affect innovative capability and export performance.

Based on previous research, most of the studies on internationalization were conducted in the context of multinational companies (MNEs)(Mudalige et al. 2018) and less attention were given to SMEs (Lejpras 2019). It is important to understand that internationalization can be considered as important strategy in order to increase the SMEs growth, competitiveness and superior performance through economic of scales and various advantages (Coviello et al. 2011; Toulouva et al. 2015) to keep up with evolving technological and social scenarios (De Marco et al. 2020; Falahat et al. 2020).

Furthermore, there is lack of studies on emerging small economies (Chen et al. 2016; Hasaballah et al. 2019) such as Malaysia since most of the studies mainly focus on industrialized and developed economies (Haddoud et al. 2017; Leonidou & Katsikeas 2010). Hence this study will focus on small emerging market namely Malaysia from the perspective of manufacturing industry. This is because manufacturing industry encourage more internationalization activities (Tabares Arroyave et al. 2017) and contributed handsomely for overall total export in 2020 by 9.4 percent out of 13.5 percent (Malaysia 2021). Despite the study of SMEs from emerging market is growing but limited (Samiee & Chirapanda 2019) further investigation is needed (Bianchi et al. 2018; Ribau et al. 2016).

The dynamic of global business environment bring both challenges and opportunities for SMEs (Dominguez & Mayrhofer 2017). The challenges in term of fierce competition brought about by large local and foreign firms (Linan et al. 2019). The competitive condition is more intense in a small market such as Malaysia. This situation forced SMEs to expand their presence across national borders to increase sales and better performance.

Despite the initiative and development program still many Malaysian SMEs could not successfully penetrate international market (Ismail et al. 2016). The failure rate of international market penetration among Malaysian SME was 60 percent, hence

further investigation and deep analysis of the local authorities (Chong 2012; Husin & Ibrahim 2014). Consequently, this study views more research is needed to identify the possible solution.

Innovation capability is the objective of SMEs aiming to compete with larger and more resource possessing competitor (Saunila 2019). This is because innovative capability is considered crucial for achieving superior performance in international market in order to achieve economies of scale (Fernandez-Mesa & Alegre 2015). Furthermore, innovative activities such as developing new product and process to adapt with the external environment plays an important role for SMEs success in international market (Guarascio et al. 2017). Being competitive and innovative SMEs is among the strategic action plan for Malaysian SMEs development from year 2016 until 2025 (SME Info). Therefore, in today's competitive environment, SMEs are urged to involve in innovative capability and adapting internal firm strategy with the external environment as the way to success in export market (Bicakcioglu-Peynirci et al. 2020). Pioneer studies has identified that the internationalization of small firms in the context of export is considered as an innovation activity of the firm (Andersen 1993; Reid 1981). Additionally, Malaysian export sector contribute handsomely to the gross domestic product (GDP) for many years (Ismail 2016) and report by Department of Statistics Malaysia stated that export of SMEs valued at RM124.3 billion in 2021.

In the Malaysian context, there are six focus area of SMEs in Malaysia in order to become globally competitive SMEs across all sectors that enhance wealth creation and contribute to the social well-being, and of the focus area is innovation and technology which is the focus area in this research study. This will give better indications on the innovation capabilities on the export performance of the SMEs firm in Malaysia from the organizational capabilities and environmental perspective.

The study on the export performance has begun since year 1978 by Bilkey, however the latest study by Chen et al. (2016) shows some significant different. The study of export performance is a continuous process and need to be seen from various perspective. The development of dynamic capabilities and relational exchange

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