

SME Export Propensity in Emerging and Developing Economies: An Integrative Review of Firm Capabilities, Business Networks, and Institutional Constraints.

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Pour citer cet article : MARZOUK .A (2026) « SME Export Propensity in Emerging and Developing Economies: An Integrative Review of Firm Capabilities, Business Networks, and Institutional Constraints », African Scientific Journal « Volume 03, Num 38 » pp: 001 – 030.



DOI : 10.5281/zenodo.23185478
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Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in employment, innovation, and economic development, yet their participation in international markets remains uneven across emerging and developing economies. Existing research has examined SME export propensity through distinct theoretical lenses, particularly the Resource-Based View, Network Theory, and Institutional Theory. However, these streams are frequently treated in isolation, limiting understanding of how internal, relational, and contextual factors jointly shape firms' decisions to participate in export markets. This article provides an integrative review of the literature on SME export propensity in emerging and developing economies, synthesizing theoretical and empirical research around three complementary dimensions: firm capabilities, business networks, and trade-related institutional constraints. The review adopts a concept-driven, iterative approach based on thematic searches, review-led source discovery, citation tracing, and targeted retrieval of studies relevant to the review's core constructs. The review corpus comprises 47 theoretical, review, empirical, and institutional sources selected for their relevance to SME export propensity, firm capabilities, business networks, institutional constraints, and emerging and developing economy contexts. The review indicates that firm-level capabilities, including managerial experience, workforce development, and digital capability, are generally associated with greater export propensity, while business networks can facilitate access to knowledge, legitimacy, contacts, and complementary resources. At the same time, customs procedures, regulatory burdens, administrative requirements, and institutional uncertainty can increase the costs and difficulties associated with exporting. The synthesis further suggests that these dimensions do not operate independently: firm capabilities and networks may help SMEs compensate for institutional weaknesses or enhance their ability to benefit from more favorable institutional conditions. Building on these insights, the article develops an integrated framework of SME export propensity, identifies gaps concerning interaction effects, construct measurement, and contextual variation, and proposes a future research agenda. The review also discusses implications for SME internationalization research in Morocco and comparable emerging and developing economies.

Keywords: SME export propensity; SME internationalization; firm capabilities; business networks; institutional constraints; emerging and developing economies

1. Introduction

1.1 SME Export Propensity as a Distinct Internationalization Outcome

Research on small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) internationalization has developed into a broad field encompassing foreign-market entry, international entrepreneurship, networks, knowledge, technology, firm resources, and institutional conditions. This expansion has produced several theoretical traditions and a fragmented body of research (Dabić et al., 2020). Internationalization is also broader than exporting: firms may engage in foreign markets through exporting, foreign production, investment, alliances, or other cross-border activities (Child et al., 2022). This article narrows that wider phenomenon to exporting because export participation provides a distinct and observable form of SME internationalization.

Within the export literature, export propensity must be distinguished from export intensity and export performance. Export propensity concerns whether a firm participates in exporting, whereas export intensity concerns the share or level of sales generated abroad and export performance captures broader outcomes after entry. Haddoud et al. (2021) show that export entry has received less attention than post-entry outcomes and that its determinants may not be identical to those of export intensity or performance. Treating export propensity as a separate outcome is therefore analytically important. In this review, export propensity refers to the likelihood or status of an SME participating in export markets, commonly operationalized as a binary distinction between exporters and non-exporters.

1.2 Why Emerging and Developing Economies Require a Context-Sensitive Explanation

SME export participation is especially sensitive to context because smaller firms generally operate with narrower financial, managerial, informational, and organizational resource bases than larger enterprises. These constraints can increase dependence on external knowledge, business relationships, support organizations, and the institutional environment in which cross-border activity occurs (Child et al., 2022). Evidence from North Africa also indicates that firm resources do not operate independently. In Algerian SMEs, different combinations of managerial, relational, marketing, and innovative resources were associated with different levels of export propensity. This suggests that the contribution of a particular capability can depend on complementary resources and contextual conditions (Haddoud, Beynon, et al., 2018).

This contextual sensitivity is particularly relevant in emerging and developing economies. Much of the theoretical and empirical knowledge on SME internationalization has been developed in advanced economies. Firms in developing contexts may operate within different institutional frameworks, support systems, resource conditions, and regulatory environments (Child et al.,

2022). The geographical distribution of export-entry research remains uneven: Haddoud et al. (2021) identify 51 studies conducted only in developed economies, compared with 22 in emerging economies and nine covering both groups. Evidence from Africa remains comparatively limited. These imbalances do not imply that emerging and developing economies form a homogeneous category; rather, they strengthen the need for explanations that recognize contextual variation and avoid assuming that findings transfer uniformly across settings.

1.3 Review Objective and Contribution

Three theoretical streams are particularly relevant to this problem. The Resource-Based View explains how heterogeneity in firm resources and capabilities can generate different internationalization outcomes. Network and social-capital perspectives explain how SMEs may obtain knowledge, contacts, legitimacy, and complementary resources through relationships. Institutional theory focuses on how formal rules, regulations, administrative procedures, and uncertainty shape the costs and feasibility of international activity. The Uppsala tradition provides an additional process perspective by emphasizing experiential learning, commitment, and, in its later development, network position and liability of outsidership (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 2009).

Although these perspectives have been combined in parts of the literature, their integration remains uneven. The objective of this article is therefore not to establish that capabilities, networks, or institutions matter individually, since substantial research already supports each explanation. Instead, the review examines how firm capabilities, business networks, and trade-related institutional constraints can be brought together more coherently to explain SME export propensity in emerging and developing economies. Particular attention is given to the conditions under which these dimensions may reinforce, complement, or compensate for one another. This focus is justified by evidence that institutional conditions can alter the contribution of firm resources and that networking can have different implications under different institutional environments (Manolopoulos et al., 2018; Stojčić et al., 2024). The article contributes by clarifying construct boundaries, synthesizing evidence on interaction and contingency, and developing an integrated conceptual framework without assuming universal relationships across contexts. Morocco is used as a focused contextual application rather than as the sole geographical basis of the review, allowing the wider synthesis to be connected to a developing-economy setting with extensive formal trade integration.

1.4 Structure of the Article

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 explains the review approach and analytical scope. Section 3 establishes the theoretical foundations, followed by reviews of firm

capabilities, business networks, and trade-related institutional constraints in Sections 4–6. Section 7 integrates these perspectives into a conceptual framework. Section 8 discusses emerging-economy implications with particular attention to Morocco, Section 9 identifies research gaps and priorities for future research, and Section 10 concludes the review.

2. Review Approach and Analytical Scope

2.1 Nature and Scope of the Integrative Review

This article adopts an integrative literature-review approach to examine SME export propensity across complementary bodies of research. Rather than seeking an exhaustive inventory of studies or a pooled effect estimate, the review synthesizes theoretical and empirical work explaining how internal capabilities, relational resources, and institutional conditions shape firms' participation in export markets. This approach reflects the theoretical diversity of SME internationalization research, which spans Uppsala, resource-based, network, and institutional perspectives (Dabić et al., 2020). The aim is therefore conceptual integration while preserving distinctions between constructs, mechanisms, and levels of analysis.

The evidence base combines foundational theoretical contributions, major reviews and meta-analyses, and peer-reviewed empirical studies. Selected institutional and trade-policy sources are used only to establish contextual facts, particularly for Morocco and free trade agreements, and are not treated as substitutes for theoretical or firm-level empirical evidence.

2.2 Literature Selection and Analytical Boundaries

The literature was assembled iteratively through thematic searches, review-led source discovery, citation tracing, and targeted retrieval of studies relevant to the review's core constructs. Priority was given to peer-reviewed research, original theoretical contributions, systematic reviews or meta-analyses, and empirically relevant studies. Recent evidence was emphasized where available, while no fixed publication-year cut-off was imposed because the analysis also requires seminal theoretical work.

The principal analytical boundary is SME export propensity, understood as participation in exporting rather than export intensity or post-entry export performance. Studies of other export outcomes are included only when they clarify mechanisms relevant to export entry. Evidence from emerging and developing economies is prioritized because institutional conditions, resource constraints, and support systems may differ from those in advanced economies (Child et al., 2022). African, MENA, and Moroccan studies are incorporated where directly relevant, without assuming that findings from one context are transferable to another. Because the review was not designed as a systematic review with a formal exhaustive screening protocol, it does not report PRISMA-style screening counts or claim comprehensive coverage of the literature.

2.3 Organization of the Literature and Theoretical Lenses

The literature is organized around three recurring explanatory dimensions: firm capabilities, business networks, and institutional conditions, consistent with prior reviews of SME export entry (Haddoud et al., 2021). Four theoretical lenses support this organization. The Uppsala perspective explains experiential learning, commitment, network position, and liability of outsidership. The Resource-Based View explains firm-level capability heterogeneity. Network and social-capital perspectives explain access to external information, contacts, legitimacy, and resources. Institutional theory explains how formal rules, administrative procedures, and regulatory uncertainty shape export decisions.

The three analytical dimensions used in this review are derived from established theoretical and empirical streams in SME internationalization. Firm capabilities are grounded primarily in the Resource-Based View and SME export-entry research (Barney, 1991; Dhanaraj & Beamish, 2003; Haddoud et al., 2021). Business networks draw on the Uppsala network perspective and social-capital research (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Institutional constraints are informed by institutional theory and export-barrier research (Leonidou, 2004; North, 1990; Peng et al., 2008). These dimensions serve as analytical categories for literature synthesis rather than as empirical explanatory variables or measurement items.

These perspectives are treated as complementary rather than competing explanations. Free trade agreements are therefore positioned as part of the wider institutional and trade-policy context rather than as direct firm-level explanatory variables. This structure provides the basis for examining both the distinct contribution of each dimension and the ways in which capabilities, networks, and institutional conditions may interact.

3. Theoretical Foundations of SME Export Propensity

3.1 Uppsala, Learning, and Network Insidership

The Uppsala internationalization process model provides a useful foundation for understanding why knowledge, experience, and relationships matter for SME internationalization. In its original formulation, internationalization is a cumulative process in which market knowledge and market commitment interact with current activities and commitment decisions (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Experiential knowledge is central because participation in foreign markets can reduce uncertainty, improve understanding of customers and institutions, and reveal new opportunities. The model is therefore better understood as a learning-and-commitment mechanism than as a rigid sequence of stages. Later work further emphasizes that commitment can itself stimulate learning and opportunity development, making the relationship between knowledge and commitment reciprocal rather than one-directional (Johanson & Vahlne, 2006; Welch et al., 2016).

The 2009 revision places business networks at the centre of this process. Johanson and Vahlne (2009) argue that firms internationalize within networks of connected relationships in which knowledge, trust, and commitment develop through interaction. This leads to the concept of liability of outsidership: firms lacking a meaningful position in relevant networks may have weaker access to relationship-specific knowledge, trusted partners, and opportunities. For SMEs, this shift is particularly important because external relationships can partly compensate for limited internal resources. However, network participation is not automatically beneficial; dependence on particular partners can also restrict autonomy or market development (Coviello & Munro, 1997). The Uppsala perspective therefore contributes a process explanation of learning and relational embeddedness. It does not imply that all firms internationalize through an identical sequence or that cross-sectional export status captures the complete internationalization process (Vahlne & Johanson, 2017).

3.2 Resource-Based View and Firm-Level Heterogeneity

The Resource-Based View (RBV) explains why firms facing similar external opportunities may nevertheless differ in their capacity to enter foreign markets. Its central premise is resource heterogeneity: firms control different combinations of assets, knowledge, skills, organizational processes, and capabilities (Barney, 1991). For SMEs, this perspective is particularly relevant because many strategically important resources are embodied in managers, employees, routines, and organizational systems rather than in large stocks of physical or financial assets. The export literature applies this logic by treating organizational, entrepreneurial, and technological resources as potential sources of variation in internationalization outcomes (Dhanaraj & Beamish, 2003). Two qualifications are important. First, observable characteristics such as managerial experience, employee training, or digital presence should not automatically be described as rare, inimitable, or sufficient for sustained competitive advantage. They are more defensibly interpreted as indicators of a firm's internal capability base. Second, capabilities may operate in combinations rather than as independent inputs. Evidence from Algerian SMEs indicates that export propensity differs across configurations of managerial, relational, marketing, and innovative resources (Haddoud, Beynon, et al., 2018). Institutional conditions can also alter the usefulness of internal resources for exporting (Manolopoulos et al., 2018). RBV therefore provides a strong explanation of firm-level heterogeneity, but not a context-free explanation of SME export propensity.

3.3 Network and Social Capital Perspectives

Network and social-capital perspectives extend the analysis beyond resources located inside the firm. Social capital refers to actual and potential resources embedded in, available through, and derived from relationships, including structural connections, relational assets such as trust and

obligations, and shared cognitive frames (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). For resource-constrained SMEs, relationships can widen the effective resource base by providing market information, knowledge, referrals, legitimacy, and access to complementary capabilities that may be costly to develop internally. Empirical evidence supports this mechanism. Network ties can facilitate knowledge acquisition and exploitation, while the structure and diversity of international relationships can influence the speed and outcomes of SME internationalization (Musteen et al., 2010; Yli-Renko et al., 2001).

This perspective also requires construct discipline. Social capital is multidimensional and depends on the configuration and quality of relationships; it cannot be inferred simply from the existence of a formal tie. Networks may also create dependence, overembeddedness, or restricted access to alternative information. Accordingly, formal business-association membership, examined later in this review, is best treated as an observable channel through which relational resources may become available. It should not be treated as a complete measure of social capital or international network insidership.

3.4 Institutional Theory and the External Business Environment

Institutional theory shifts attention from firm resources and relationships to the rules and arrangements within which economic activity occurs. North (1990) conceptualizes institutions as humanly devised constraints that structure interaction and shape incentives. Formal institutions can reduce uncertainty by clarifying rights and procedures, but they can also increase transaction costs when rules, enforcement arrangements, or administrative processes impose additional burdens. Peng (2002) extends this reasoning to strategy by arguing that firm choices cannot be explained solely by industry conditions or internal resources. Managers act within formal and informal institutional frameworks that influence which strategic options are feasible and supportable.

The institution-based perspective is particularly relevant in emerging economies, where market-supporting rules and enforcement arrangements may be more visible determinants of firm strategy rather than stable background conditions (Peng et al., 2008). For SMEs, formal trade rules, customs procedures, regulatory requirements, and administrative uncertainty can be especially demanding because smaller firms generally have less capacity to absorb fixed compliance costs or maintain specialized trade functions. Institutional theory therefore explains the external conditions under which firm capabilities and relational resources are deployed, while allowing for heterogeneous responses across firms, sectors, and national settings.

3.5 Complementarity of the Theoretical Perspectives

These perspectives address different parts of the same explanatory problem and are therefore treated as complementary rather than competing. The Uppsala tradition explains internationalization as a learning and relationship-development process. RBV explains why SMEs differ in the internal resources and capabilities they can mobilize. Network and social-capital perspectives explain how firms extend that resource base through relationships, while institutional theory identifies the formal rules, costs, and uncertainty surrounding cross-border activity. No single lens fully explains SME export propensity: internal capabilities are deployed within institutional environments, and access to external relational resources can alter how firms respond to both opportunities and constraints. This complementarity provides the theoretical basis for the review's three substantive dimensions—firm capabilities, business networks, and institutional conditions—and for examining their interaction rather than treating them as isolated determinants.

4. Firm Capabilities and SME Export Propensity

Firm capabilities help explain why SMEs facing similar foreign-market opportunities do not necessarily make the same export decisions. SMEs differ in the knowledge, skills, managerial resources, and organizational systems available to identify and exploit international opportunities. The literature reviewed here focuses on three capability dimensions relevant to export participation: managerial experience, employee training, and digital capability. These dimensions are analytically distinct, but their contribution may depend on how they are combined and on the context in which they are deployed.

4.1 Managerial Experience and Human Capital

Managerial experience is an important form of human capital because accumulated knowledge can influence opportunity recognition, interpretation of uncertainty, and the allocation of scarce resources. This mechanism is particularly relevant to SMEs, where strategic decisions are often concentrated in a small management team. Experienced managers may possess stronger sector knowledge and greater ability to evaluate the commercial implications of entering foreign markets. Empirical research generally supports the relevance of managerial and human capital to internationalization, although measures and outcomes differ. Javalgi and Todd (2011), examining Indian SMEs, find that education and international experience are positively associated with internationalization. Love et al. (2016) likewise show that international experience contributes to the geographic scope and intensity of exporting among UK SMEs. Meta-analytic evidence points in the same general direction: Mansion and Bausch (2020) report a positive association between human capital and SME export propensity and find that this relationship is stronger in developing-country samples.

These findings require caution. International experience, general managerial experience, and sector-specific experience are related but different constructs, and positive relationships are not universal. Babatunde (2017), for example, does not find managerial experience to be a significant determinant of export propensity among Nigerian SMEs. Managerial human capital therefore appears relevant to export participation, but its contribution depends on what type of experience is measured and on the context in which it is used.

4.2 Formal Employee Training and Workforce Capability

Managerial capability may be insufficient when employees lack the skills required to implement international activities. Formal employee training represents an investment in workforce knowledge and adaptability and can strengthen technical, production, managerial, and commercial skills needed to respond to demanding market requirements. This can be particularly important for SMEs, where a relatively small workforce often performs multiple functions.

Blyde (2016) provides relatively direct evidence connecting training to export entry. Using longitudinal Chilean firm-level data, the study finds that initially non-exporting firms providing employee training subsequently display higher rates of export entry. The relationship is stronger when training is sustained and when complementary resources, including employee education and specialized software, are available. This suggests that training may be most valuable when it forms part of a broader capability configuration.

Evidence from developing-country firm data is less uniform. Ferro (2011) reports positive associations between training and exporting in some specifications, whereas Babatunde (2017) does not find consistent evidence that training predicts export propensity among Nigerian SMEs. Formal training should therefore not be treated as a sufficient indicator of export capability: programmes vary in content, intensity, quality, and relevance. The broader evidence nevertheless supports workforce development as one potential component of the organizational capacity required for export participation.

4.3 Digital Presence and Organizational Capability

Digital technologies can reduce search and communication costs, improve access to market information, increase visibility to potential customers, and support coordination with business partners. Their contribution to internationalization, however, depends not only on technology ownership but also on the firm's ability to integrate and use it effectively.

Dethine et al. (2020) make this distinction explicit by treating digitalization as a combination of resources and organizational capabilities. Their review links digital technologies to export management through market intelligence, customer relationships, e-commerce, supply-chain coordination, and internal organization. Añón Higón and Bonvin (2024) provide longitudinal

evidence that digitalization increases the probability of export participation among Spanish manufacturing SMEs both directly and indirectly through productivity. Their results also indicate that different digital technologies operate through different mechanisms.

Evidence closer to basic digital presence is also generally supportive. Ferro (2011) associates firms' use of websites for communicating with customers and suppliers with a higher likelihood of exporting. Fakhri and Ghazalian (2014) find a positive relationship between ICT use and export participation across MENA manufacturing firms, although their Morocco-specific estimate is not statistically significant. Balchin and Edwards (2008) likewise report positive relationships between communication technologies and export behaviour in African manufacturing firms.

Measurement remains important. Website ownership captures only a basic level of digital presence. It does not show whether firms conduct e-commerce, use digital market analytics, integrate enterprise systems, automate operations, or possess the organizational skills needed to exploit digital technologies. Digital presence is therefore better interpreted as one observable manifestation of a broader organizational capability than as a complete measure of digital transformation.

4.4 Resource Complementarity and Context Dependence

The capability literature also suggests that SME internationalization depends on configurations of complementary resources rather than on one resource alone. Haddoud, Beynon, Jones, and Newbery (2018), studying Algerian SMEs, identify significant differences in export propensity across combinations of managerial, relational, marketing, and innovative resources. Configurations containing stronger export-oriented managerial resources include larger proportions of exporters, whereas some configurations with marketing or innovative capabilities but weaker managerial resources show lower export participation. This North African evidence illustrates that the same capability may not produce the same outcome when complementary resources are absent.

Ko et al. (2022) reach a related conclusion: new-market-entry and new-product-development capabilities are individually related to SME exporting, but their combined value depends on managerial capacity and financing intentions. Mansion and Bausch's (2020) meta-analysis likewise shows that the strength of human-capital relationships with exporting varies across national contexts. Capability effects are therefore neither automatically additive nor context-free. Two implications follow. First, managerial experience, workforce development, and digital capability should not be collapsed into one undifferentiated capability measure because each addresses different informational, organizational, and coordination requirements. Second, their value depends partly on other resources and on the environment in which the firm operates. Firm

capabilities therefore provide an essential but incomplete explanation of SME export propensity, creating a direct bridge to the relational resources and institutional conditions examined in the following sections.

5. Business Networks as Relational Resources for SME Exporting

Business networks extend the explanation of SME export propensity beyond resources held within the firm. For resource-constrained SMEs, relationships can provide access to market information, knowledge, contacts, legitimacy, and complementary resources that may be costly to acquire internally. Network perspectives therefore treat internationalization partly as a relational process: firms differ not only in what they own, but also in what they can access through relationships. This section examines the mechanisms through which networks may support export participation and the role of formal business associations. It then reviews evidence linking network participation to exporting and considers the limits of formal membership as a proxy for broader relational resources.

5.1 Networks, Knowledge Access, and Liability of Outsidership

The network extension of the Uppsala model places relationships at the centre of internationalization. Johanson and Vahlne (2009) argue that firms operate within networks in which knowledge, trust, and commitment develop through repeated interaction. A firm can therefore be disadvantaged not only because it is foreign, but because it lacks a useful position within relevant business networks. Liability of outsidership captures this problem: firms outside important networks have weaker access to relationship-specific knowledge, trusted partners, and opportunities circulating among connected actors.

This mechanism is particularly relevant to SMEs because external relationships can widen an otherwise limited resource base. Coviello and Munro (1997) show how small software firms used network relationships to obtain market knowledge, gain foreign-market access, and support subsequent international development. Their evidence also shows that relationships are not uniformly beneficial. Dependence on powerful partners can restrict autonomy or market choices. Network position therefore matters through the quality and usefulness of relationships rather than through the number of contacts.

Social-capital research reinforces this distinction. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) conceptualize social capital as resources embedded in and accessible through relationships, while Yli-Renko et al. (2001) show that social interaction and customer-network ties can support knowledge acquisition. Musteen et al. (2010) likewise demonstrate that different network characteristics have different implications for SME internationalization. Networks can therefore reduce information

and resource disadvantages, but their value depends on the structure, content, and quality of the relationships involved.

5.2 Formal Business Associations as Resource-Access Mechanisms

Formal business associations represent one institutionalized route through which SMEs may gain access to external resources. Bennett (1998) distinguishes between a service logic and an influence logic. Under the first, associations provide information, advice, training, technical assistance, events, and other services. Under the second, they aggregate business interests and represent firms collectively through lobbying, standard setting, or engagement with public authorities. For small firms with limited internal capacity, both functions may reduce the cost of obtaining information or acting individually.

Bennett and Ramsden (2007) show that SMEs often value bundles of association benefits, including information, networking, advice, lobbying, training, trade missions, and marketing opportunities. Costa et al. (2017) similarly identify industrial business associations as intermediaries supporting internationalization through information sharing, promotional activities, training, technical and legal assistance, and connections with public and private actors. These functions can help firms identify opportunities, interpret foreign-market requirements, locate partners, and obtain specialized support.

Association membership, however, does not guarantee that these resources are used or equally valuable to all firms. Bennett (1998) and Bennett and Ramsden (2007) emphasize variation in association effectiveness and member needs, while Brache (2018) distinguishes formal membership from actual engagement. Benefits therefore depend on organizational capacity, participation, the relevance of available services, and the wider institutional environment.

5.3 Business-Network Participation and Export Propensity

Empirical studies support a relationship between formal network participation and exporting. Boehe (2013), studying Brazilian furniture SMEs, conceptualizes industry-association membership as access to network resources. Association membership strongly predicts export propensity, while collaborative intensity is more closely associated with export intensity. This distinction suggests that formal network access may be especially relevant at the export-entry stage, where information, referrals, and initial contacts can reduce uncertainty and coordination burdens.

Gashi et al. (2014), using firm-level data from transition economies, also find that business-association membership is positively associated with export behaviour. They interpret associations as channels through which resource-constrained SMEs can obtain export information, services, and access to wider business networks. African evidence points in the same direction. Balchin and

Edwards (2008) report that membership in a business association or chamber of commerce is associated with a higher probability of exporting among manufacturing firms.

These findings provide a rationale for treating formal network participation as a relational resource relevant to export propensity. They should not, however, be interpreted as proof that membership causes exporting. Export-oriented firms may be more likely to join associations, and membership benefits may depend on how actively firms use available relationships and services. The evidence therefore supports an association between formal network participation and export entry, together with plausible mechanisms based on information, contacts, and resource access.

5.4 Limits of Formal Network Measures

Formal association membership is much narrower than the theoretical concepts of social capital or network embeddedness. Social capital can involve trust, reciprocity, tie strength, network configuration, shared language, repeated interaction, and access to specific resources. Johanson and Vahlne's (2009) network insidership likewise refers to a meaningful position developed through interaction and commitment. A binary indicator of business-association membership does not capture these dimensions.

Formal membership is therefore best interpreted as potential access to a relational infrastructure rather than as a direct measure of social capital. A firm may belong to an association but participate minimally, while another may derive substantial information, representation, referrals, or international contacts from the same organization. Conversely, SMEs can possess valuable informal or commercial networks without formal association membership. Network measures capturing international ties, collaboration intensity, association membership, or social capital should consequently not be treated as interchangeable.

Business networks are better understood as enabling relational resources whose effects depend on access, engagement, and context. They may complement internal capabilities by supplying knowledge and contacts that firms lack, but can also generate dependence or limited value when relationships are weak or poorly aligned with export needs. This conditional interpretation creates a bridge to the institutional perspective: the usefulness of network resources may depend partly on the regulatory and administrative environment in which SMEs attempt to export.

6. Trade-Related Institutional Constraints and SME Export Propensity

Institutional conditions provide the external-environment explanation for why SMEs with similar market opportunities and comparable internal resources may still differ in their participation in export markets. Internationalization does not occur in an institutional vacuum: firms operate within systems of formal rules, administrative procedures, enforcement arrangements, and regulatory requirements that influence the costs and uncertainty of cross-border exchange. For SMEs, these

conditions can be especially important because limited managerial and financial resources reduce their capacity to absorb fixed compliance costs or maintain specialized customs and regulatory expertise. The literature therefore suggests that institutional constraints should be examined not only as characteristics of the business environment, but also in relation to firms' resources, exposure, and ability to respond to them.

6.1 Formal Institutions and SME Internationalization

North (1990) provides the foundational logic for understanding institutions as humanly devised constraints that structure interaction. Formal institutions include written political, judicial, and economic rules that define rights, obligations, procedures, and incentives. Such rules can reduce uncertainty by clarifying how economic exchange is organized, but they can also raise transaction costs when compliance, monitoring, information acquisition, or enforcement is demanding. This dual role is important for exporting because cross-border transactions expose firms to additional administrative and regulatory requirements beyond those encountered in domestic markets.

Peng (2002) extends this reasoning to firm strategy by arguing that strategic choices cannot be explained solely by industry conditions or firm-specific resources. The institution-based view emphasizes that managers act within formal and informal frameworks that shape which strategic options appear feasible and legitimate. Peng et al. (2008) further highlight the relevance of this perspective in emerging economies, where market-supporting institutions and enforcement arrangements may be less stable or predictable than in advanced economies. For SMEs, the implication is not that institutions determine export decisions uniformly, but that they alter the environment in which firm capabilities and market opportunities are evaluated and deployed.

6.2 Customs, Trade Regulations, and Administrative Costs

The export-barrier literature translates this broad institutional logic into more specific constraints. Leonidou (2004) identifies unfamiliar exporting procedures, documentation requirements, government regulations, and foreign-market rules among the external barriers that can hinder the initiation or development of exporting. These constraints create costs because firms must obtain information, interpret requirements, prepare documentation, adapt products or procedures, and manage potential delays. The burden can be proportionally greater for SMEs because these activities consume management time and specialized expertise that smaller firms may not possess internally.

Evidence from developing economies reinforces this concern. Tesfom and Lutz (2006) identify procedural complexity, export documentation, paperwork delays, special customs requirements, foreign regulations, and government bureaucracy as recurring problems for manufacturing SMEs in developing countries. Clarke (2009), examining African manufacturers, similarly shows that

trade-related business conditions matter for exporting, although the relationship depends on how constraints are measured. These studies suggest that customs and trade regulations matter not simply because formal rules exist. Their economic significance also lies in the organizational effort and uncertainty associated with understanding and complying with them. Consequently, trade-related institutional constraints are analytically distinct from other business-environment problems such as finance, taxation, corruption, infrastructure, or competition, even when these factors coexist.

6.3 Institutional Uncertainty and SME Resource Constraints

Institutional conditions are unlikely to affect all SMEs in the same way. The same regulatory requirement may be manageable for a firm with experienced staff, digital systems, external advisers, and established export routines. It may represent a substantial obstacle for a smaller or less experienced firm. This creates an important connection between institutional theory and capability-based explanations: institutions shape the conditions of exchange, while firm resources influence how effectively those conditions can be interpreted and managed.

Empirical evidence supports this contingency argument. Manolopoulos et al. (2018), studying Greek SMEs, find that home-country institutional dimensions influence exporting both directly and through their interaction with firm resources. Export bureaucracy is negatively associated with export intensity, while regulatory complexity weakens some positive resource-export relationships. Their study concerns export intensity rather than export entry and therefore cannot be transferred directly to export propensity. Nevertheless, it illustrates a broader theoretical point: the contribution of firm resources can depend on the institutional environment in which they are deployed. Evidence from emerging economies also shows that adverse institutional conditions do not always produce a simple reduction in exporting. Some firms may seek foreign markets partly to escape unfavorable domestic conditions, while others may lack the resources needed to do so. Institutional effects should therefore be treated as conditional rather than uniformly negative.

6.4 Perceived Barriers, Exposure, and Measurement Problems

A major difficulty in this literature concerns the interpretation of perceived institutional barriers. Survey measures often ask managers to rate the severity of customs, trade regulations, or other business constraints. Such measures capture firms' experiences and perceptions, but they are not equivalent to objective indicators of institutional quality. In particular, exporters are more exposed to customs procedures, border documentation, and international regulatory requirements than non-exporters. They may therefore report these constraints as more severe precisely because they interact with them more frequently.

Clarke (2009) demonstrates this problem directly in African firm-level data. Firms' own perceptions of customs and trade regulations are positively associated with exporting, whereas alternative measures designed to reduce exposure and endogeneity concerns produce the expected negative relationship. Balchin and Edwards (2008) similarly caution that perceived business constraints may be endogenous to firms' international activity. North African evidence also points to complexity rather than a uniform negative pattern. Haddoud, Beynon, Jones, and Newbery (2018) find that perceived procedural barriers are not significantly related to export propensity among Algerian manufacturing SMEs, while some environmental barriers are positively associated with exporting. More recently, Stojčić et al. (2024) report a positive association between broader perceived institutional obstacles and export propensity across SMEs in several emerging economies, with substantial variation across regions.

These findings do not imply that institutional constraints are unimportant. Instead, they show that perceived barriers can reflect both constraint and exposure. A manager may report severe customs difficulties for different reasons. The difficulties may discourage exporting, arise because an exporting firm encounters them regularly, or reflect a context in which exporting offers an alternative to domestic institutional weaknesses. For research on SME export propensity, this creates an important measurement requirement: subjective obstacle measures should be interpreted as exposure-sensitive perceptions rather than direct measures of objective institutional quality. It also reinforces the need to examine institutional conditions together with firm capabilities and relational resources. Institutional constraints may raise the costs of export participation, but the ability to understand, absorb, or overcome those costs can differ substantially across firms. This provides the basis for the integrative analysis developed in the next section.

7. Integrating Capabilities, Networks, and Institutional Conditions

Firm capabilities, business networks, and institutional conditions each contribute to explanations of SME export propensity. An integrative perspective moves beyond parallel lists of determinants because SMEs deploy internal resources within institutional environments while accessing additional resources through external relationships. This section synthesizes the evidence around these connections. It develops an integrated framework in which export propensity reflects the combined influence of internal capabilities, relational resources, and institutional conditions rather than any one factor operating in isolation.

7.1 Limits of Single-Factor Explanations

Single-factor explanations identify mechanisms but provide an incomplete account of SME export participation. Resource-based research highlights firm-level heterogeneity, while network research shows how SMEs access information, contacts, legitimacy, and external resources. Institutional

research adds a third level by showing that regulations, administrative procedures, and enforcement arrangements shape the costs and uncertainty of international exchange. Their effects, however, are frequently conditional. Haddoud, Beynon, Jones, and Newbery (2018), for example, show that export propensity among Algerian SMEs differs across configurations of managerial, relational, marketing, and innovative resources. Mansion and Bausch (2020) likewise find that the relationship between intangible resources and SME exporting varies across contexts. These findings challenge the assumption that any one capability, network tie, or institutional condition has a uniform independent effect.

7.2 Capabilities and Institutional Conditions

The first connection concerns the relationship between internal capabilities and the institutional environment. Capabilities can help SMEs identify opportunities, process information, coordinate activities, and satisfy technical or administrative requirements, but the value of those capabilities depends partly on the conditions under which they are deployed. Regulatory complexity, customs requirements, and administrative uncertainty can increase the amount of managerial attention, knowledge, and organizational capacity required to export. Firms with stronger capabilities may therefore be better positioned to absorb or manage institutional demands, while firms with thinner resource bases may face the same formal requirement as a more substantial obstacle.

Manolopoulos et al. (2018) provide empirical support for this contingency logic by showing that home-country institutional conditions affect SME exporting both directly and through their interaction with firm resources. Although their outcome is export intensity rather than export entry, the study establishes that firm resources do not operate independently of institutional context. Ko et al. (2022) similarly show that organizational capabilities produce different exporting outcomes depending on managerial capacity and financing intentions. Together, these studies suggest that capability-based explanations are strengthened when the institutional and organizational conditions governing resource use are made explicit.

7.3 Networks as Complementary or Compensatory Resources

Networks create a second form of interdependence because they can extend the effective resource base of the SME. Through formal and informal ties, firms may obtain market information, referrals, regulatory knowledge, legitimacy, and collective representation that would otherwise require internal investment. This mechanism can operate in two conceptually different ways. Under a compensatory or substitutive logic, networks help firms cope with weak institutions or scarce internal resources by supplying information and support that the formal environment does not provide effectively. Under a complementary logic, network resources become more valuable

when institutions are sufficiently supportive for firms to convert relational access into commercial opportunities.

The distinction matters because the literature does not support a universal claim that networks simply neutralize institutional weakness. Stojčić et al. (2024) find that the relationship between networking, perceived institutional obstacles, and SME export propensity differs across emerging-economy regions. Their results are consistent with a compensatory pattern in South Eastern Europe, where networking is most strongly associated with exporting under more adverse institutional conditions. In Central Asia, by contrast, the pattern is complementary: networking is more beneficial under lower perceived institutional obstacles. The interaction is not statistically significant in their Middle Eastern subsample. Networks should therefore be understood as context-dependent relational resources rather than automatic substitutes for effective institutions.

7.4 Network–Institution Interactions

The interaction literature further shows why construct precision is necessary. Stojčić et al. (2024) examine a broad institutional-obstacle index together with a networking construct that combines business-association membership and network-related knowledge acquisition. Escolá et al. (2022), by contrast, study institutional distance between home and destination environments and distinguish commercial and technological collaboration networks. They find that some vertical networks reduce the negative association between institutional distance and export entry, while this moderating effect largely disappears when export volume among established exporters is considered. This difference reinforces the distinction between entering export markets and explaining post-entry export intensity.

African evidence provides additional interaction precedents. Okumu et al. (2025) examine regional economic community membership together with customs delays and report interaction effects in some export specifications, although not consistently for overall exporter status. Balchin and Edwards (2008) include both business-association membership and trade-related business constraints in their analysis of African manufacturing firms, but they do not directly estimate an association-membership-by-trade-constraint interaction. The evidence supports network–institution interactions without establishing one universal direction or operationalization. Whether networks compensate for, complement, or fail to alter institutional conditions appears to depend on the type of network, the institutional construct, the export outcome, and the regional setting.

7.5 An Integrated Framework of SME Export Propensity

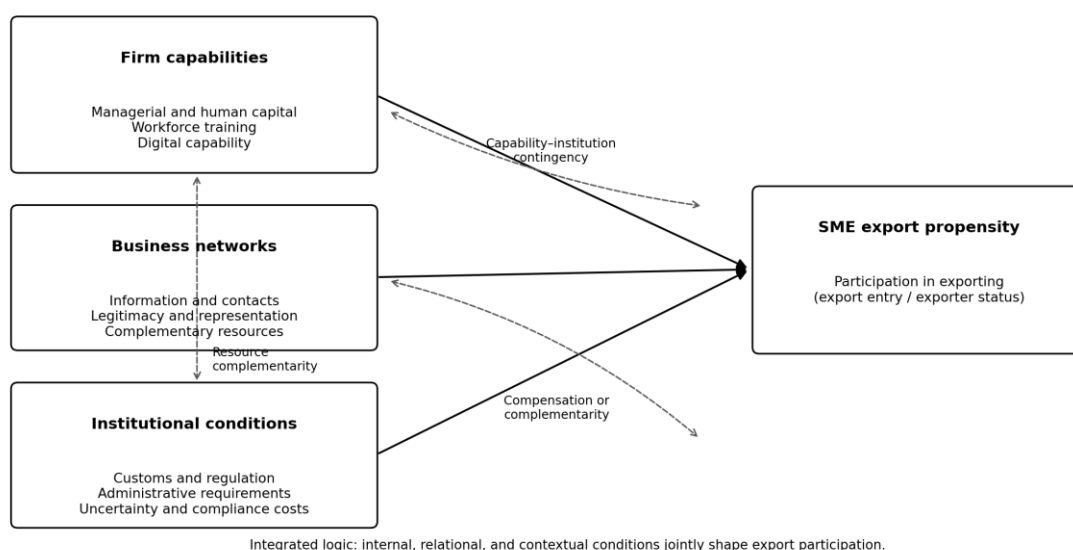
The integrated framework developed from this review organizes SME export propensity around three distinct but connected domains. Firm capabilities represent the internal knowledge, skills, and organizational resources available to recognize and act on foreign-market opportunities.

Business networks represent relational channels through which SMEs may access information, contacts, legitimacy, representation, and complementary resources. Institutional conditions represent the formal rules, procedures, and administrative requirements that structure cross-border exchange and shape its associated costs and uncertainty.

These domains should remain conceptually distinct because each operates through a different mechanism; their integration occurs through conditional relationships. Institutional conditions can change the demands placed on firm capabilities; stronger capabilities can improve a firm's ability to interpret and manage those demands. Networks can expand the resources available to the firm and may either compensate for institutional weaknesses or complement favorable institutional conditions. Export propensity is consequently understood as an outcome associated with the configuration of internal, relational, and contextual resources confronting the SME.

The framework also clarifies the article's contribution. Capabilities, networks, and institutions are already established explanations of SME internationalization. The unresolved issue is how these dimensions combine, vary across contexts, and change with measurement choices. An integrative explanation therefore requires neither a universal buffering hypothesis nor one dominant theory. It preserves each perspective's mechanism while examining when the dimensions reinforce, substitute for, or constrain one another. This logic provides the basis for the contextual application to emerging economies and Morocco developed in the following section.

Figure N°1: Integrated framework of SME export propensity



Source: Author's synthesis based on the reviewed literature.

8. Emerging-Economy Implications and the Moroccan Context

The integrated perspective developed above is particularly relevant to emerging and developing economies, where formal market access can coexist with substantial differences in firms' capacity

to identify and use international opportunities. Morocco provides a useful contextual application because it combines an extensive trade-agreement architecture with regulatory, documentary, and capability requirements that firms must manage in practice. The Moroccan case therefore illustrates a broader distinction between the formal availability of international market access and the firm-level ability to convert that access into export participation.

8.1 Morocco's Trade and Institutional Environment

Morocco has developed a broad network of regional and bilateral trade agreements. In its 2024 Trade Policy Review statement, Morocco reported 12 free trade agreements covering around 100 countries (WTO, 2024b). These include arrangements with the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, the European Free Trade Association, Arab partners, and African markets through the African Continental Free Trade Area. The WTO Secretariat similarly documents a wide preferential-trade architecture (WTO, 2024a). For SMEs, however, the analytical significance of this architecture lies less in the number of agreements than in the market-access conditions attached to them. Different agreements contain different product coverage, tariff schedules, rules of origin, and procedural requirements. Formal access is therefore heterogeneous across products and destinations and cannot be treated as a uniform opportunity available to all firms on identical terms.

8.2 FTAs, Formal Market Access, and SME Export Capability

The EU-Morocco Association Agreement illustrates the conditional nature of preferential access. It provides tariff advantages for originating Moroccan products, but eligibility depends on compliance with origin rules and documentary requirements such as EUR.1 certificates or specified invoice declarations (European Communities & Kingdom of Morocco, 2000). Morocco has also pursued trade-facilitation reforms. Its 2024 WTO report describes PortNet as the single window for foreign-trade procedures and reports extensive paperless processing, electronic certificates of origin, and digitized customs procedures (WTO, 2024b). These reforms can reduce procedural friction, but they do not eliminate the underlying requirements attached to preferential trade. SMEs must still identify applicable rules, document origin, meet relevant standards, and manage destination-specific customs and regulatory procedures. The institutional environment can therefore create opportunities while simultaneously demanding information, technical knowledge, and organizational capability.

8.3 Why Formal Trade Access Does Not Automatically Produce SME Export Participation

The distinction between nominal and effective market access is central to understanding SME export propensity. Cliteur et al. (2021) emphasize that SMEs generally possess fewer time and

information resources for identifying and understanding trade-agreement benefits. Awareness may also follow, rather than precede, a firm's decision to trade internationally. Legge and Lukaszuk (2024) show more directly that preference utilization entails information, documentation, sourcing, and administrative costs because firms must actively claim preferential treatment and demonstrate compliance with rules of origin. Their evidence comes from Switzerland and should not be transferred directly to Moroccan SMEs. Nevertheless, the mechanism is relevant: a tariff preference has practical value only when firms know it exists, can establish eligibility, and judge that the expected benefit exceeds the cost of using it. Formal access therefore does not itself establish that an SME possesses the capabilities or relational resources needed to exploit that access.

8.4 Implications for Research on Moroccan SMEs

This distinction suggests that future research on Moroccan SMEs should move beyond treating FTA membership or the existence of preferential agreements as sufficient explanations of export participation. More informative firm-level research would examine awareness of specific agreement provisions, actual preference utilization, and capacity to satisfy rules of origin and standards. It should also examine access to trade-related information and the role of business networks in helping firms interpret or manage these requirements. It would also distinguish between firms that possess legal market access and firms that can convert that access into commercial activity. Comparative work across sectors and firm-size categories could further identify whether compliance demands create different thresholds for participation among otherwise similar SMEs. In this sense, Morocco reinforces the broader argument of this review: institutional opportunities are mediated by firm capabilities and relational resources. The relevance of FTAs to SME internationalization therefore lies not only in the opportunities they formally create, but also in the uneven capacity of firms to identify, access, and use those opportunities.

9. Research Gaps and Future Research Agenda

The review indicates that the main research challenge is no longer to establish whether firm capabilities, business networks, or institutional conditions matter for SME internationalization. Evidence already supports the relevance of each dimension. The more important gaps concern how these constructs are measured, how they interact, and how far findings travel across institutional and geographical settings. Future research should therefore move beyond adding further isolated determinants and instead improve construct precision, test conditional relationships, and use designs that can distinguish export entry from later internationalization outcomes.

9.1 Construct and Measurement Gaps

A first gap concerns the frequent use of related but non-equivalent constructs. Export propensity, export intensity, and export performance capture different outcomes and should not be treated interchangeably (Haddoud et al., 2021). Similar problems arise on the explanatory side. Managerial experience is not necessarily international experience, and website ownership is only a limited indicator of digital capability. Likewise, formal business-association membership does not measure trust, tie strength, or network embeddedness, while perceived institutional obstacles are not direct measures of objective institutional quality. The literature on FTAs raises a comparable issue: the existence of an agreement does not establish firm awareness, eligibility, preference utilization, or effective market access (Clicteur et al., 2021; Legge & Lukaszuk, 2024). Future studies should therefore align theoretical constructs more closely with observable indicators and report proxy limitations explicitly. Greater measurement precision would also make results across countries and datasets more comparable.

9.2 Interaction and Contingency Gaps

A second gap concerns the tendency to estimate direct effects separately. The reviewed evidence suggests that capabilities may work as bundles, networks may widen access to resources, and institutional conditions may alter the value of both internal and relational resources. Haddoud, Beynon, Jones, and Newbery (2018) show that export propensity differs across resource configurations, while Ko et al. (2022) demonstrate that capability effects can depend on managerial and financing conditions. The network-institution relationship is similarly contingent. Stojčić et al. (2024) find patterns consistent with compensation in some emerging-economy regions, complementarity in others, and no significant interaction elsewhere. Escolá et al. (2022) also show that network moderation differs between export entry and subsequent export volume. Future research should therefore test interactions and configurations directly rather than assuming that capabilities, networks, and institutional conditions have independent and additive effects.

9.3 Geographic and Contextual Gaps

The evidence base also remains geographically uneven. Reviews of SME internationalization and export entry show a strong concentration of studies in developed economies. Evidence from Africa and other lower- and middle-income contexts remains comparatively limited (Child et al., 2022; Haddoud et al., 2021). The relevant gap, however, is not simply the absence of more country studies. Emerging and developing economies differ in regulatory implementation, market-support institutions, access to information and finance, business-network structures, and administrative capacity. Future comparative research should identify which contextual mechanisms account for variation in export propensity rather than treating emerging economies, Africa, MENA, or

Morocco as interchangeable categories. Multi-country designs would be especially useful when they preserve country-level institutional differences instead of absorbing them into broad regional labels. This would help distinguish genuinely generalizable relationships from effects that depend on specific regulatory, infrastructural, or support-system conditions.

9.4 Methodological Gaps

Methodological choices also limit what can be inferred from the literature. Cross-sectional designs remain common and cannot observe the learning, commitment, or network-position changes emphasized by process theories such as Uppsala (Welch et al., 2016). Perception-based measures of institutional barriers create an additional challenge because exporters may report more serious customs or regulatory obstacles precisely because they are more exposed to them (Clarke, 2009). Network measures often record membership rather than actual engagement, resource flows, or tie quality, while FTA studies frequently lack firm-level measures of awareness and utilization. Future work would benefit from longitudinal and repeated-observation designs, richer network indicators, combinations of objective and perception-based institutional measures, and clearer separation of export entry from post-entry intensity and performance. Where longitudinal data are unavailable, stronger attention to temporal ordering, robustness checks, alternative operationalizations, and endogeneity risks would still improve inference. Researchers should also report how missing data, sample restrictions, sector coverage, and survey design affect the comparability of export-propensity estimates across studies.

9.5 Priorities for Future Research on SME Export Propensity

Taken together, these gaps suggest five priorities. First, research should develop more precise measures of capabilities, relational resources, institutional conditions, and trade-policy utilization. Second, greater attention should be given to capability complementarity and network-institution interactions, including the conditions under which networks substitute for weak institutions or complement supportive ones. Third, longitudinal research is needed to examine how learning, capabilities, and network positions evolve before and after export entry. Fourth, comparative studies should explain contextual variation across emerging and developing economies rather than simply control for country differences. Finally, research on FTAs should move from agreement existence toward firm-level mechanisms such as awareness, rules-of-origin capability, certification, preference utilization, and access to trade-related knowledge. These priorities would shift the literature from identifying additional determinants toward explaining how internal, relational, and institutional conditions combine to shape SME export propensity. They would also make it easier to compare findings across settings because differences could be traced to clearly specified constructs, mechanisms, and contextual boundaries rather than to loosely defined

measures. Such a shift is necessary if research is to explain not only which SMEs export, but why similar firms facing apparently similar opportunities can reach different internationalization outcomes.

10. Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this article shows that SME export propensity in emerging and developing economies cannot be explained adequately by a single set of determinants. Firm capabilities affect whether SMEs can recognize and act on foreign-market opportunities. Business networks can provide information, contacts, legitimacy, and complementary resources. Institutional conditions shape the costs, uncertainty, and administrative requirements associated with exporting. The central conclusion is therefore not that one of these perspectives is more important than the others, but that SME export participation is better understood through their combination and interaction.

This integrative perspective also clarifies why apparently similar SMEs may reach different export outcomes. Managerial experience, employee training, and digital capability can strengthen a firm's capacity to evaluate and pursue international opportunities, but their value depends partly on the resources and institutional conditions surrounding the firm. Networks may reduce information gaps or provide access to resources that smaller firms cannot generate internally. Their usefulness, however, varies according to the type and quality of the relationship and the environment in which it operates. Institutional constraints can increase the costs and complexity of exporting, while firms with stronger capabilities or more useful network connections may be better placed to manage those constraints. Existing evidence, however, does not support a universal assumption that networks always compensate for weak institutions or that institutional obstacles always reduce export participation in a simple linear way.

A further contribution of the review is to preserve distinctions that are often blurred in empirical research. Export propensity is not equivalent to export intensity or export performance. Formal business-association membership does not itself demonstrate network embeddedness or social capital. Website ownership captures only a limited aspect of digital capability, while perceived customs and trade-regulation obstacles are not direct measures of objective institutional quality. Similarly, the existence of an FTA does not establish that an SME is aware of, eligible for, or able to use preferential market-access provisions. These distinctions are important because imprecise measurement can produce apparently conflicting findings that partly reflect differences in constructs rather than genuine theoretical disagreement.

For emerging and developing economies, including Morocco, the implications are especially relevant. Formal market access and trade-policy liberalization create opportunities, but firms differ

in their capacity to recognize and exploit them. Future research should therefore move beyond isolated direct effects toward more precise measures, longitudinal designs, and explicit tests of resource complementarity and network-institution interactions. Firm-level studies of FTA awareness, rules-of-origin capability, certification, preference utilization, and access to trade-related knowledge would be particularly valuable. By focusing on these mechanisms and contextual boundaries, research can provide a more complete explanation of why some SMEs enter export markets while others facing apparently similar opportunities remain domestically oriented.

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