

Enhancing SME Export Performance in Indonesia: The Role of Learning Orientation and Pro-expansion Network Quality

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the mediating role of pro-expansion network quality on the relationship between learning orientation and export performance, the moderating impact of competitive intensity on the association between pro-expansion network quality and export performance, and the effect of international market selection on export performance. This research employed a deductive approach, grounded in the Resource-Advantage Theory, and a quantitative research design. Empirical model testing was conducted on SME exporters in Central Java and Yogyakarta, Indonesia, using SEM AMOS. The findings reveal that all the direct relationships exert positive effects. In addition, this study addresses the research gap by demonstrating that pro-expansion network quality is a significant mediator. However, there is no moderating role of competitive intensity. Pro-expansion network quality positively correlates with export performance, regardless of the level of competition. Practically, these results highlight the importance of SMEs in investing in continuous learning, building pro-expansion network quality, and carefully deciding the international market selection to improve export performance. Limitations include the emphasis on a singular strategic orientation, mediator and moderator variables, a particular geographic region, and firm size, and the use of a cross-sectional data design. Future research should explore other strategic orientations, mediators, moderators, and more diverse samples while employing longitudinal methods.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi efek mediasi kualitas jejaring pro-ekspansi pada hubungan antara orientasi pembelajaran dan kinerja ekspor, efek moderasi intensitas kompetitif pada hubungan antara kualitas jejaring pro-ekspansi dan kinerja ekspor, dan pengaruh pemilihan pasar internasional pada kinerja ekspor. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deduktif, yang didasarkan pada Teori Resource-Advantage, dan desain penelitian kuantitatif. Pengujian model empiris dilakukan pada 195 UKM eksportir di Jawa Tengah dan Yogyakarta, Indonesia, dengan menggunakan SEM AMOS. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa semua hubungan langsung memiliki dampak positif. Selain itu, studi ini menjembatani kesenjangan penelitian dengan menunjukkan bahwa kualitas jejaring pro-ekspansi merupakan mediator yang signifikan. Namun, tidak ada peran moderasi dari intensitas kompetitif. Kualitas jejaring pro-ekspansi berpengaruh positif terhadap kinerja ekspor, terlepas dari tingkat persaingan. Secara praktis, hasil ini menyoroti pentingnya UKM untuk berinvestasi dalam pembelajaran berkelanjutan, membangun kualitas jejaring pro-ekspansi, dan memutuskan secara cermat pemilihan pasar internasional untuk meningkatkan kinerja ekspor. Keterbatasannya meliputi penekanan pada satu bentuk orientasi strategis, mediator dan moderator, wilayah geografis dan ukuran perusahaan tertentu, serta penggunaan desain penelitian cross-sectional. Penelitian di masa mendatang sebaiknya mengeksplorasi orientasi strategis, mediator, dan moderator yang lain, sampel yang lebih beragam, serta menggunakan metode longitudinal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Indonesia significantly contribute to the national economy, accounting for 60.51% of GDP, 99% of the total business units, and 97% of employment. Nonetheless, regarding export performance, these enterprises contribute merely 15.7% of the total national export value (KemenkoEkon, 2024). Suboptimal export performance is primarily due to inadequate export readiness, both

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organizational and product (Gerschewski et al., 2020), export market accessibility, export operational hurdles, and dynamic export market environment (Tarihóran et al., 2023). In this context, the capacity of SMEs to continuously acquire, disseminate, and utilize new knowledge is critical (Baker et al., 2022). Learning orientation offers strategic solutions to address these challenges by increasing the ability to adapt, innovate, and develop flexible responses to changes in the export market, thereby paving the way for increased export performance (Ding et al., 2022).

For years, management and marketing scholars have studied the influence of learning orientation on improving export performance; however, the empirical findings remain inconclusive. To date, studies have demonstrated a positive relationship (Escandon-Barbosa & Salas-Páramo, 2023; Isichei et al., 2023; Ismail, Mohamad, & Ahamat, 2023; Karami & Tang, 2019), whereas others have demonstrated an adverse association as a consequence of the psychological disparities in international markets and the potential leakage of technology and knowledge (Kazemi et al., 2021). Moreover, findings from several studies reveal that learning orientation does not significantly affect export performance, as firms encounter more complex business environments when expanding overseas (Mac & Evangelista, 2017), and firms face difficulties integrating knowledge gained through learning orientation into organizational practices (Assadinia, Kadile, Gölgeci, & Boso, 2019). In addition, most studies use the Resource-based View (RBV) approach that emphasizes internal resources, while the influence of external resources and factors is less considered. Lastly, these studies are generally conducted in developed countries, so the results are not always relevant for the context of SMEs in developing countries, such as Indonesia.

As indicated by the research gaps, the research problem is to ascertain how to manage learning orientation to improve export performance using a relevant theoretical basis, especially in the context of SMEs in Indonesia. Since the context of this research is SMEs with constrained internal resources and specific emphasis on export performance, the Resource-Advantage Theory (R-A theory) can be employed to explain how firms can generate a competitive advantage in the export market by leveraging resources (Acikdilli et al., 2020), which need not be owned but merely accessible for producing market offerings (Hunt, 2018). When internal resources are limited, firms may access available external resources, one of which is through networks (Wang & Fang, 2021). As resources are integral to developing a competitive advantage, learning-oriented firms seek to outstrip competitors by ensuring optimum access to and utilizing resources, both internally and externally, through networks that support business expansion strategies (Imanto et al., 2019). The higher the quality of the network, the better the firm's performance (Hikmah et al., 2021). Therefore, this study proposes pro-expansion network quality as a mediating variable to facilitate learning orientation toward improving export performance. This study additionally examines the relationship with other pertinent variables that might be associated with export success according to R-A theory, specifically international market selection and competitive intensity. Thus, the research questions posed are: Does pro-expansion network quality mediate the relationship between learning orientation and export performance? Does competitive intensity moderate the relationship between pro-expansion network quality and export performance? Is there a direct effect among the variables: learning orientation, pro-expansion network quality, international market selection, and export performance?

The unit of analysis of this study is SME exporters in Indonesia, particularly in Central Java and Yogyakarta Provinces, which have a high concentration of SMEs but encounter challenges in exports, as indicated by lower export performance relative to other regions on the same island (BPS, 2024). This research offers a novel contribution by integrating learning orientation and pro-expansion network quality within the R-A theoretical framework to explore their impact on SME export performance. Specifically, this study offers empirical insights into how these factors operate in the Indonesian context, which has received relatively little attention in previous literature. The novelty of this study lies in its contextual approach, which is relevant to the distinct challenges of SMEs in developing countries.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Learning Orientation

Learning orientation is one key mechanism for organizations to achieve and maintain knowledge resources, defined as absorptive capacity (Stelmaszczyk, 2020). Firms with high absorptive capacity can establish effective mechanisms and routines to acquire new knowledge from external and integrate it into their pre-existing organizational knowledge base (Gutierrez-Gutierrez et al., 2018). Grounded in R-A theory, learning orientation, viewed as the ability to strengthen internal learning systems and recognize learning opportunities, is a

strategic asset that can create competitive advantages (Hunt, 2018). Optimizing the current internal learning systems includes fostering an organizational culture that promotes employee learning, creativity, and competency enhancement (Ojha et al., 2018; Wahyuni & Sara, 2020). In addition, recognizing learning opportunities involves carefully monitoring internal and external conditions to identify competency gaps and strategically allocating resources for potential improvements (Correia et al., 2023; Park & Seo, 2018). Accordingly, by emphasizing these two aspects, firms can develop absorptive capacity that facilitates innovation and adaptation, enabling them to address swiftly evolving market dynamics and attain a competitive edge (Ismail et al., 2023).

2.2. Pro-expansion Network Quality

Pro-expansion networks involve business ties with partners (suppliers, customers, colleagues, or the business community) and other relevant and influential stakeholders to the firm's expansion (Chung et al., 2020). It includes current networks and potential new connections across industries and markets that support firms in gaining insights and opportunities for expansion (Sandri & Widodo, 2020). Within the framework of R-A theory, these networks' quality, characterized by synergistic engagement and relationship integrity, can be considered a relational resource that significantly contributes to attaining a competitive advantage (Hunt, 2018). By engaging synergistically, business network members proactively participate and mutually collaborate to achieve collective outcomes more efficiently than separately (Goswami & Agrawal, 2020). Furthermore, relationship integrity reveals the degree of commitment, trust, and consistency in interactions (Connelly et al., 2018). Commitment to an agreement is essential in establishing bonds (Ahamed & Noboa, 2022). Trust can build sustainable relationships (Boateng et al., 2022). Consistency in interactions reduces uncertainty and establishes a stable environment (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Thus, pro-expansion network quality can function as a sound basis for creating a productive and sustainable cooperative environment that enables firms to access external resources they may not be able to obtain independently (Monticelli et al., 2022), understand the business environment more thoroughly (Wang & Fang, 2021), and discover new opportunities (Sandri & Widodo, 2020).

2.3. International Market Selection

Penetrating new markets, especially foreign ones, requires a commitment of tangible and intangible resources (Hoque et al., 2022). With limited resources, firms face the challenge of making strategic decisions regarding which markets to enter and how to allocate these resources to support the move effectively (Karami & Tang, 2019). In this context, market selection concerns market size or growth potential and the interaction between the firm's internal resources and external market dynamics (Francioni & Martín Martín, 2024).

Firms need to consider several processes when deciding which export market to select. First, the strengths and weaknesses analysis of internal resources is conducted to develop a robust penetration strategy (Hoque et al., 2022). For instance, SMEs with unique products and abundant raw materials yet lacking export experience can collaborate with intermediaries to enter the export market. Second, knowledge of market characteristics across countries, such as competition intensity, customer needs, and regulations (Martín Martín et al., 2022). Next, the growth potential compatible with resource endowments is identified (Francioni & Martín Martín, 2024). For example, SMEs that have coffee products with distinctive tastes can target countries that already have a large market for specialty coffee. Finally, the risks and barriers that may arise in the internationalization process are managed (Al Qur'an, 2024). Firms can implement mitigation planning strategies by evaluating political or currency risks and trade barriers to reduce the impact. By considering these processes, firms can strategically assess and choose the appropriate markets for expansion.

2.4. Learning Orientation and Pro-expansion Network Quality

Organizations must formulate agile strategies to thrive and grow in this ever-changing business environment (AlTaweel & Al-Hawary, 2021). Learning orientation is critical to this effort (Correia et al., 2023). When internal learning systems are strong, organizations can easily create a solid and lasting learning culture (Ojha et al., 2018). This culture involves constantly improving employees' knowledge (Wahyuni & Sara, 2020) and sharing knowledge between them (Batra et al., 2023). Employees with strong expertise in different fields of business and industry and actively participating in circulating knowledge will strengthen the overall competencies of a firm (Goswami & Agrawal, 2020). Therefore, a firm can improve its understanding of its partners' needs and problems by providing innovative solutions that can help expand its business network more

efficiently (Abbu & Gopalakrishna, 2021). Firms are also credited as valuable partners with reliable knowledge resources (Sakhdari et al., 2020), which helps foster trust (Boateng et al., 2022) and positive interactions (Kurniawan et al., 2021), which, in turn, build the basis for improving the quality of pro-expansion networks.

Moreover, firms that identify learning opportunities are open to improvement. Therefore, the firm focuses on existing knowledge and areas with potential growth (Park & Seo, 2018). Firms' relationships with others within pro-expansion networks are significantly influenced by how competently they identify learning opportunities from interactions between every partner (Wahyuni & Sara, 2020). Businesses aware of learning opportunities view the interaction as an opportunity to develop themselves (Falahat et al., 2021). Consequently, firms are more receptive and amenable to partner ideas or suggestions and adaptive to improvements in response to such inputs (Soares & Perin, 2020). It leads to the formation of mutually beneficial collaborative relationships (Setiawan & Ferdinand, 2021), thereby achieving higher pro-expansion network quality. Therefore, this study hypothesizes the following:

H1. Learning orientation positively influences pro-expansion network quality

2.5. Pro-expansion Network Quality, International Market Selection, and Export Performance

Entering a foreign market presents several challenges for firms, including limited resources and knowledge (Karami & Tang, 2019). Therefore, firms can collaborate with local and international partners and intermediaries to enable them to access the resources and expertise needed for the internationalization process (Wang et al., 2018). A high-quality pro-expansion network with an active and synergistic collaborative relationship, mutual commitment, trust between members, and good communication may have several advantages. Pro-expansion network quality helps provide firms with the necessary resources from partners (Wang & Fang, 2021), such as capital, infrastructure support, distribution networks, or existing relationships with local stakeholders. Firms that find an international partner with a strong infrastructure and wide distribution networks in one country are more inclined to target the market for expansion. Under these relationships, firms can access such resources and enter the market more efficiently, reducing storage and delivery costs (Katsikeas et al., 2020). Therefore, firms can increase their export profitability to reach a broader market.

Additionally, pro-expansion network quality enables firms to understand the foreign market context from experienced partners, especially in the realms of business knowledge (e.g., industry trends and consumer preferences) or institutional knowledge (trade regulations and policies) (Boateng et al., 2022). By using this information, firms can enhance their understanding of worldwide markets and increase their potential to adapt their products or services to new requirements in the target market. Furthermore, firms can address the inescapable uncertainty of going international (Francioni & Martín Martín, 2024). Strong and reliable partners inform, advise, and support firms in solving problems that reduce uncertainty and minimize risks (Yan et al., 2020). Thus, more effective expansion planning can increase competitiveness and performance in foreign markets. Given these arguments, this research posits the following hypothesis:

H2. Pro-expansion network quality positively affects international market selection.

H3. Pro-expansion network quality positively affects export performance.

2.6. International Market Selection and Export Performance

Selecting an international market is essential in expanding business to foreign markets (Al Qur'an, 2024). As a strategy for determining the best international opportunity for business expansion (Yan et al., 2020), it has some significant impacts on not only the firm's first actions in the global market but also has the potential to be an essential factor in the long-term success (Li et al., 2023). A well-thought-out market selection ensures a proper market penetration strategy (He et al., 2016). By analyzing market characteristics, customer needs, competitors' strategies, and regulations in these markets (Martín Martín et al., 2022), companies can determine which markets are best suited to their products or services to meet higher sales performance goals. Moreover, companies can adjust their bundling of resources, considering that market trends will create more value, subsequently enhancing export performance (Yan et al., 2020).

In addition, uncertainty can be lowered through a prudent choice of international markets. Firms entering new global markets take risks and face challenges in specific international locations (Presutti et al., 2024). Failure to consider these political risks, exchange rate movements, and barriers can have financial consequences for firms regarding their international operations (Vijayalakshmi et al., 2022). Companies can

achieve better performance in the global market by wisely selecting markets based on analysis and understanding of their internal capabilities, market characteristics, growth opportunities, and proper mitigation plans. This study posits the following hypothesis based on these arguments:

H4. International market selection positively influences export performance

2.7. The Mediating Role of Pro-expansion Network Quality

Learning orientation is acknowledged as a crucial factor in enhancing export performance, yet empirical research indicates that the direct impact of learning orientation on export performance is not consistently significant. This results from various challenges, such as a lack of knowledge and competencies to operate in complex international markets (Mac & Evangelista, 2017) or resource constraints to translate their newly acquired information into business practices (Assadinia et al., 2019). Therefore, learning orientation alone was insufficient to enhance export performance, and mediating variables were required to facilitate the relationship. There has been a paucity of examination into the mediating factors affecting the relationship in prior research, with only a several mediators employed, including innovation (Kazemi et al., 2021), innovativeness (Ismail et al., 2018), and marketing program planning (Assadinia et al., 2019); all of which are rooted in the RBV as the theoretical framework.

From the lens of R-A theory, a high-quality pro-expansion network can help firms overcome the barriers to implementing a learning orientation in improving export performance. It offers business knowledge and competencies that partners may lack in-house (Monticelli et al., 2022). Harnessing partners in networks with pertinent experience and expertise, directly or indirectly related to international markets, can help firms enhance their understanding of complex markets and identify opportunities (Hughes et al., 2019). Consequently, with high-quality pro-expansion networks, firms can compensate for boundaries in access to knowledge and competencies that prevent improved export performance.

Additionally, the quality of pro-expansion networks may help firms alleviate resource constraints associated with translating knowledge into business practices (Martín Martín et al., 2022). A study by Faroque et al. (2022) demonstrated that in strong networks, firms can share resources with business partners, especially knowledge of international markets. It allows firms to assimilate better the new knowledge obtained from learning orientation into their business strategies, enabling firms to leverage new insights strategically and effectively. Hence, within the framework of global expansion, the quality of pro-expansion networks can overcome resource constraints by serving as an essential mechanism connecting learning orientation and export performance. This research posits the following hypothesis based on the presented arguments:

H5. Pro-expansion network quality positively mediates the relationship between learning orientation and export performance.

2.8. The Moderating Role of Competitive Intensity

Competitive intensity denotes a high-competition situation in which there are too many competitors in the market relative to existing growth opportunities (Martin & Javalgi, 2016). Increased global competition causes firms to suffer from higher resource optimization pressures, stand out from rival companies, and adjust quickly because of rapid changes (Hoque et al., 2022; Zhang & Jedin, 2022). In this context, the quality of pro-expansion networks becomes very important to help firms cope with competitive pressures. Empirical studies show that firms operating in highly competitive environments are more likely to rely on business networks to survive and thrive (Crick & Crick, 2020). For example, research by Faroque et al. (2022) shows that effective collaboration within networks is crucial for accessing numerous resources, such as foreign market knowledge, more quickly and efficiently, which are key to dealing with competitive pressures. Firms may use inter-firm relationships to accelerate product innovation and reduce operational costs (Chung & Ho, 2021). Furthermore, it allows businesses to be more agile and exploit expansion opportunities more effectively (Adomako et al., 2022).

Firms facing intense competitive pressures in global markets could be incentivized to engage effectively with expansion-supporting networks to secure a more substantial basis for boosting exports (Crick & Crick, 2020). In competitive markets, the quality of pro-expansion networks can have a more profound influence on export performance. The challenges and opportunities that firms face may lead to a higher need for effective networking among themselves.

This study posits the following hypothesis according to the considerations above:

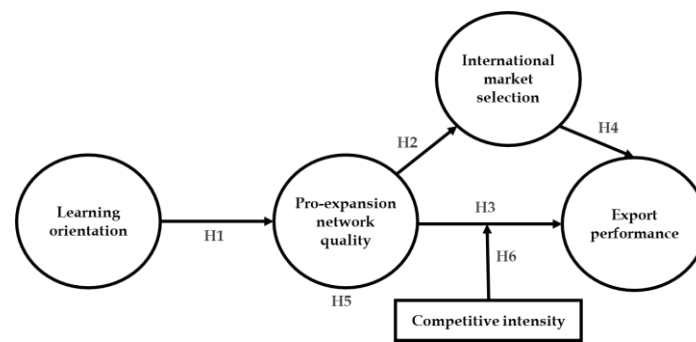


Figure 1. Conceptual model

H6. Competitive intensity positively moderates the link between pro-expansion network quality and export performance. Figure 1 illustrates the research model derived from the six proposed hypotheses.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The measurements of the variables in this study were adapted from previous studies and developed based on the theoretical framework. Each variable is described in indicators, which are then operationalized in the form of statements in the questionnaire used as the research instrument. Learning orientation serves as a resource that enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of organizational learning systems and assists firms in identifying opportunities to acquire relevant knowledge and skills. The measures were modified from the research of Batra et al. (2023), Falahat et al. (2021), and Wahyuni & Sara (2020). Export orientation is a concept that comprises several elements regarding profitability, sales, growth, and the firm's satisfaction level with the general performance of its export activities. Therefore, the measures of export performance were adapted from Kolbe et al. (2022). Martín Martín et al. (2022) derive international market selection indicators that focus on several processes when deciding which export market to select. Cho et al. (2023) provide the basis for determining indicators of competitive intensity, specifically in the context of exports. This study develops new indicators for the pro-expansion network quality based on theoretical frameworks applied in this research.

Each statement was measured using an interval scale with a score of 1-10, where a score of 1 represented strong disagreement and a score of 10 represented strong agreement with the proposed statement. The implementation of a 10-point scale in this study was based on several methodological and practical considerations. According to Sekaran & Bougie (2019), the interval scales provide a more precise measurement of respondents' preferences and intensities, with broader scales, such as 10 points, yielding greater response variation compared to narrower scales, such as 5 or 7 points. With more choices, respondents can articulate their views or feelings more comprehensively (Taherdoost, 2019). Moreover, prior research utilizing a 10-point scale has proven its validity and reliability (Ferdinand, 2021; Hendar et al., 2020; Mulyana et al., 2021). In terms of ease of use, this scale is also more intuitive for respondents because the numbers 1 to 10 are commonly used in daily life to assess something (Backhaus et al., 2023). Therefore, the selection of a 10-point scale is not only based on theoretical reasons but also on practical factors that enhance the quality of the data collected.

This research employed a deductive approach and a quantitative research design. Empirical research model testing was conducted on SME exporters based in Central Java and Yogyakarta Provinces, Indonesia. Data on SME exporters were obtained from the Trade and Industry Office of Central Java Province and Yogyakarta Special Region. The technique used to select the sample was purposive sampling with two criteria: direct or indirect exports for at least two years, and becoming a network member or having partners. These criteria are essential to ensure that respondents possess adequate experience and network involvement to support empirical analysis, enhancing the accuracy of research findings in describing the link between examined variables. However, this technique has the potential for sampling bias, such as a lack of representation of the broader population, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Before its application as a measurement, the research instrument was subjected to a face validity assessment through consultations with several stakeholders, including experts from exporter associations

and representatives of the selected samples, to gather feedback for enhancing the questionnaire and to gain a more profound understanding of the perceptions regarding the measurements based on their business experiences. Consequently, the questionnaire was comprehensible and aligned with the concept and context of Indonesian SMEs. The subsequent phase involved the pre-test of the research instrument to assess its validity and reliability, ensuring accurate measurements for empirical testing. The validity test is indicated by the Corrected Item-Total Correlation (calculated r value), while the reliability of a construct is shown by Cronbach's Alpha (α) value. Based on the results of the validity test, all calculated r values exceeded the r table value, hence confirming that all measurement items were valid in measuring latent variables. Moreover, the reliability test findings indicated that the Cronbach's Alpha value of each variable exceeded the threshold of 0.6, signifying that the measurement items could consistently or reliably measure the variables.

The data collection method was based on a closed-ended online questionnaire (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019) between October and December 2023 to SME owners or managers. This method was chosen because of its time and cost-effectiveness. With a well-structured questionnaire design and proper sample representation, potential issues such as accessibility limits and response bias have been anticipated. We reached 320 SMEs, provided them with information on the survey's aim and objectives, and sent invitations to participate through private messages or email. To ensure accuracy, we limited each browser or email address to one response to prevent repeated submissions and anticipate incomplete responses by embedding an asterisk (mandatory to answer) in each statement required for analysis in the Google form. During this timeframe, some respondents either did not reply or were unwilling to complete the questionnaire despite multiple contacts and reminders, resulting in 216 responses received for further analysis, indicating a response rate of 67.5%. This research examined the obtained data using SPSS (v26) for preliminary analyses and AMOS (v26) programs for measurement and structural model analyses with a maximum likelihood estimation method to provide accurate and stable results (Hair Jr et al., 2019).

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents an overview of the respondents' business profiles. The data reveals that the majority of respondents from Central Java, specifically medium-sized firms, have more than 2 to 5 years of export experience, with craft and furniture as the primary export commodities.

4.2. Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were performed before the measurement and structural model analysis to verify the normality of the data and address any concerns regarding data outliers, common method bias, response bias, and multicollinearity. Outlier detection was performed with Z-scores for univariate outliers and the Mahalanobis distance (D^2) for multivariate outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). From computing, 17 cases were denoted as outliers because the Z-score of indicators above the cut-off of ± 2.58 , and four cases were identified as outliers because their D^2 values were higher than $\chi^2=52.620$ ($p<0.001$, $df=25$) and $p_2<0.001$. In total, 21 cases were eliminated, and 195 were used for further analyses. Besides, four indicators (PNQ2, PNQ5, EP4, and EP5) were removed to ensure normality. Thus, the multivariate normality value was 2.44, which indicated that the data were normally distributed.

The common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test, which resulted in a single factor

Table 1. Business profile of the respondent

Location	Percentage (%)	Export experience	Percentage (%)
Central Java	63.43	>2-5 years	71.30
Yogyakarta	36.57	>5 years	28.70
Business scale	Percentage (%)	Export commodity	Percentage (%)
Micro	13.43	Agricultural products	27.31
Small	38.89	Fishery products	20.83
Medium	47.69	Textiles	9.72
		Craft and Furniture	29.17
		Leather products	5.56
		Others	7.41

Source: processed primary data (2024)

accounting for 48.072% (less than 50%) of the variance, indicating that the data did not show any common method bias. Third, this study conducted a response bias test using an independent-sample t-test. Consequently, the values of equal variance significance exceeded 0.05, aligning with the criteria established by Pallant (2020). There were no statistical differences in the data variation of all variables between early and late responses. The fourth test was multicollinearity, which used tolerance and VIF values to determine. These data did not detect multicollinearity because the tolerance levels exceeded 0.2, and the VIF values were below 5 (Backhaus et al., 2023).

4.3. Measurement Model Analysis

The measurement model analysis involved an examination of reliability and validity through the application of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) technique (Hair Jr et al., 2019). The analysis involved utilizing the complete dataset within a CFA model that accounted for all variables. The results of the CFA are detailed in Table 2.

Initially, composite reliability (CR) was measured to evaluate construct reliabilities in the model. Construct reliability was supported as the CR of all latent constructs in Table 2 surpassed the threshold of 0.7. Standardized factor loadings between the constructs and their measurement items were estimated to

Table 2. CFA of the model

Construct	Measure	Factor loadings	AVE	CR
<i>Learning orientation</i>			0.696	0.919
We have a continuous learning focus intention	LO1	0.796		
The sense around here is that employee learning is an investment, not an expense	LO2	0.915		
We diagnose our staff training and training needs	LO3	0.878		
We analyze the company's unsuccessful activities	LO4	0.785		
We communicate new knowledge and the lessons learned from the company's past experiences across the entire company	LO5	0.711		
<i>Pro-expansion network quality</i>			0.738	0.918
We regularly participate in collaborative meetings and forums with network members	PNQ1	0.849		
Network members regularly share information and experiences with others	PNQ3	0.781		
Network members proactively create and support collaborative initiatives together	PNQ4	0.857		
We benefit from the mutual benefits generated through networking	PNQ6	0.829		
<i>International market selection</i>			0.653	0.883
We learn about product-related activities in foreign countries by reading magazines, websites, and others	IMS1	0.767		
We use published statistical sources to assist in selecting foreign markets	IMS2	0.804		
We put considerable effort into researching foreign markets	IMS3	0.818		
We try to respond to unsolicited foreign inquiries, regardless of the country in which they originated	IMS4	0.804		
<i>Export performance</i>			0.782	0.935
Our export activity has been profitable	EP1	0.777		
Our export activity has generated a high volume of sales	EP2	0.848		
Our export activity has achieved rapid growth	EP3	0.890		
The performance of our export activity has been satisfactory	EP4	0.871		
<i>Competitive intensity</i>			0.879	0.967
Competition in our export market is cut-throat	CI1	0.906		
There are many promotion wars in our export market	CI2	0.944		
Anything that one competitor can offer others can match easily	CI3	0.909		
Price competition is a hallmark of our export market	CI4	0.949		

Source: processed primary data (2024)

Table 3. Discriminant validity

Variables	LO	PNQ	IMS	EP	CI
LO	0.834				
PNQ	0.337	0.859			
IMS	0.422	0.415	0.808		
EP	0.301	0.368	0.449	0.884	
CI	0.156	0.297	0.225	0.260	0.938

Source: processed primary data (2024)

examine the reliability of indicators. The acceptability of the indicators was determined by a factor loading value of 0.5 or higher, with an ideal threshold of 0.7 (Hair Jr et al., 2019). As shown in Table 2, all factor loadings exceeded 0.7, supporting the reliability of each indicator.

Table 2 presents that the average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the acceptable value of 0.50, demonstrating robust convergent validity (Hair Jr et al., 2019). AVE's square root was compared to the inter-construct correlations to assess the discriminant validity of the constructs. Table 3 shows that every square root of the AVE values exceeded the correlations. The findings indicate that the measures met the criteria for discriminant validity.

The measurement model validity was examined using the relative Chi-square test (CMIN/DF), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), incremental fit index (IFI), comparative fit index (CFI), normed fit index (NFI), which have been widely used in most studies and have proven to be unproblematic owing to their sensitivity to sample size (Collier, 2020). The results of the measures indicate CMIN/DF=1.353 (acceptable fit is below 3), CFI=0.984, TLI=0.979, IFI=0.984, NFI=0.941 (acceptable fit is 0.9 or above), and RMSEA=0.043 (acceptable fit is below 0.08). Hair Jr et al. (2019) assert that employing three to four qualified measures is adequate for assessing a model's goodness of fit. The findings revealed that the measurement model demonstrated a good fit.

4.4. Structural model analysis

Following the confirmation of reliability and validity, the subsequent step involved the structural model analysis. The hypothesis is examined using the criteria of a critical ratio greater than 1.96 and a p-value less than 0.05 (Hair Jr et al., 2019).

Table 4 shows that learning orientation positively influenced pro-expansion network quality ($\beta=0.724$, $SE=0.095$, $CR=8.343$, $p=***$). Consequently, the data provided full support for H1. Pro-expansion network quality has a direct and significant influence on international market selection and export performance ($\beta=0.739$, $SE=0.091$, $CR=9.215$, $p=***$; $\beta=0.372$, $SE=0.090$, $CR=3.596$, $p=***$, respectively). Therefore, the data also supports H2 and H3. International market selection positively and significantly affects export performance ($\beta=0.566$, $SE=0.073$, $CR=5.951$, $p=***$). As a result, the data fully support H4.

The bootstrap technique was used to assess this study's indirect or mediation impacts, as presented in Table 5. The indirect impact showed a β value of 0.572, an upper confidence interval of 0.718, a lower confidence interval of 0.400, and a p-value of 0.001. With the upper and lower confidence intervals not crossing 0 (zero) and a p-value<0.05, the mediation effect of pro-expansion network quality on the association between learning orientation and export performance is significant and positive. Thus, H5 is accepted. Since the direct impact of learning orientation on export performance is insignificant, with a value of $\beta=0.028$, $CR=0.415$, and p-value=0.678, it can be deduced that pro-expansion network quality fully mediates the relationship.

Table 4. Direct effect

Hypothesis	β	SE	CR	p	Result
H1 LO→PNQ	0.724	0.095	8.343	***	Supported
H2 PNQ→IMS	0.739	0.091	9.215	***	Supported
H3 PNQ→EP	0.372	0.090	3.596	***	Supported
H4 IMS→EP	0.566	0.073	5.951	***	Supported

Source: processed primary data (2024)

Table 5. Indirect effect

Hypothesis		Direct effect	Indirect effect	Confidence interval		p	Result
				Low	High		
H5	LO→PNQ→EP	$\beta = 0.028$ CR = 0.415 p = 0.678	0.572	0.400	0.718	0.001	Supported (Full Mediation)

Source: processed primary data (2024)

Table 6. Moderating effect

Hypothesis		β	SE	CR	p	Result
H6	PNQ*CI→EP	0.058	0.037	1.405	0.160	Not supported

Source: processed primary data (2024)

This study evaluates the moderating impact of competitive intensity on the link between pro-expansion network quality and export performance by generating interaction terms by multiplying mean-centered competitive intensity and pro-expansion network quality. The test results in Table 6 indicate that the interaction terms revealed an insignificant relationship ($p=0.160$); thus, moderation does not exist in the proposed relationship, and H6 is not supported.

4.5. Discussion

This study analyzes the impact of learning orientation on export performance, incorporating the mediating variable of pro-expansion network quality and the moderating effect of competitive intensity in the link between pro-expansion network quality and export performance. Additionally, the direct impact of variables was also investigated. These six hypothesized relationships are examined, and the findings indicate that five hypotheses are supported, and one is not supported.

This study addresses the research gap by analyzing the influence of learning orientation on export performance, including pro-expansion network quality as a mediating variable based on the R-A theory. This theory acknowledges that a firm must effectively combine and utilize available internal and external resources to attain a competitive advantage (Hunt, 2018). From this perspective, pro-expansion network quality helps firms overcome the barriers to implementing a learning orientation in improving export performance by offering access to necessary resources from partners, such as market knowledge and technology, that are not possessed internally (Monticelli et al., 2022; Wang & Fang, 2021). For example, participation in collaborative meetings or forums, the exchange of knowledge and experience, and the establishment of joint projects assist firms in developing internal capacity and transforming learning outcomes into practices that enhance the profitability of export activities. Consequently, it verifies the importance of pro-expansion network quality in driving the role of learning orientation toward better export performance.

Unlike previous studies that focus on the quantity or existence of networks as the determinant of performance (El Makrini, 2017; Ferrer et al., 2021; Sukaatmadja et al., 2023), this study highlights the importance of quality dimensions, such as synergistic engagement and relationship integrity, not only supporting knowledge utilization but also providing mechanisms that enable SMEs to overcome internal constraints to access international markets. It reinforces the view that active interactions between network members offer greater value than simply having passive connections. In other words, these findings emphasize the importance of how firms utilize networks rather than just the existence of networks themselves, which distinguishes this study from previous studies.

As pro-expansion network quality is a new and underexplored concept in the literature, particularly in relation to learning orientation, international market selection, and export performance, this study is unable to compare the findings of the direct routes with those of previous studies. Therefore, this study significantly contributes by introducing pro-expansion network quality as a crucial component that enhances the empirical foundation of R-A theory, which emphasizes the utilization of strategic linkages to attain competitive advantage. This method not only enhances this theory but also enriches the comprehension of the dynamics influencing export performance in the realm of international business.

In addition, the findings of this study demonstrate that the relationship between pro-expansion network quality and SME export performance is not moderated by competitive intensity. This result contradicts our hypothesis but provides evidence of the robustness of the relationship between pro-expansion network

quality and export performance. It indicates that the positive impact persists, regardless of the level of competition. In other words, it does not strengthen or weaken the positive effect of pro-expansion network quality on the export performance of SMEs. The adaptive capability of SMEs (Sadeghi et al., 2023) as research objects provides a logical explanation. Managers in these organizations typically foresee intense competition in international markets and regard it as a customary obstacle during the expansion process (Zhang & Jedin, 2022). Consequently, they already anticipated that these markets would be competitive, making the influence of variations in competition intensity less pronounced (Reimann et al., 2022). For SMEs, a strong network provides access to resources, market information, and collaboration opportunities that remain relevant in any competitive conditions (Wang & Fang, 2021).

The findings on the impact of international market selection on export performance are in line with earlier studies. Research by Martín Martín et al. (2022) found that the more systematic a company is about identifying and evaluating potential foreign markets as product destinations, the stronger its overall international performance. Similarly, research conducted by He et al. (2016) confirmed these findings and showed that firms must critically evaluate the processes for selecting foreign markets to increase export performance. As the empirical findings are consistent with those of previous research, it can be deduced that international market selection has an essential impact on export performance.

5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, SUGGESTIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This study enhances comprehension of R-A theory by emphasizing the mediating role of pro-expansion network quality in linking learning orientation and SME export performance. By highlighting how pro-expansion network quality functions as a strategic resource, this study extends the application of R-A theory to the international business context. The findings address the research gap in the literature on SME learning orientation and its effect on export outcomes by demonstrating that pro-expansion network quality not only facilitates the learning process but also overcomes obstacles, such as resource constraints or insufficient market knowledge (Karami & Tang, 2019) that hinder export performance improvement. The findings also strengthen the theoretical contribution by explaining relationships among learning orientation, pro-expansion network quality, international market selection, and export performance while demonstrating that competitive intensity does not significantly moderate the relationship between pro-expansion network quality and export performance. Therefore, this study broadens our understanding of the mechanisms that support SME performance in global markets and reinforces the significance of R-A theory in the context of international business.

This study offers several practical implications for SME managers aiming to enhance export performance. Initially, managers must prioritize developing a robust learning orientation within the organization by ensuring that the firm consistently invests in continuous learning by allocating employee training programs (Nair, 2019) and knowledge dissemination among employees (Batra et al., 2023). Training equips personnel with knowledge of global market dynamics and trends, export rules, and customer preferences across different countries. Having this knowledge disseminated across departments can enrich the information base that may discern market opportunities and improve market responsiveness (Assadinia et al., 2019; Batra et al., 2023). Second, managers must build and sustain high-quality pro-expansion networks, which can facilitate access to offering access to necessary resources from partners, such as market knowledge and technology (Monticelli et al., 2022; Wang & Fang, 2021). Finally, international market selection decisions must thoroughly evaluate market potential, market stability, and the network's ability to support expansion. Integrating these three elements will help firms address global challenges and sustainably improve export performance.

Several issues are acknowledged as research limitations of this study. First, to comprehend export performance, this study emphasizes one form of strategic orientation: learning orientation. Future research should consider exploring additional strategic orientations, such as innovation orientation or customer orientation. Innovation orientation can help companies develop more competitive products in international markets (Ramdani, Belaid, & Boukrami, 2022), while customer orientation can enhance competitiveness through a better understanding of global consumer preferences (Arun & Yildirim Ozmutlu, 2024). Future research can explore how these strategic orientations contribute to export performance, especially in manufacturing sectors, which rely heavily on product innovation and customer satisfaction. Second, this study only investigates the mediating role of pro-expansion network quality and the moderating effect of competitive intensity. Therefore, conducting further research on alternative mediators and moderators would be beneficial in obtaining new insights. For instance, further studies could explore organizational resilience

(Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2021) as a mediator, testing whether more resilient SMEs can more effectively leverage learning to enhance export performance. Additionally, digitalization (Wang et al., 2024) could be examined as a moderator to see whether technology strengthens the relationship between pro-expansion network quality and export performance. Third, this study also notes the limitation related to the diversity of the sample that focuses on a particular region and firm size, which restricts the ability to generalize the findings. Future research could expand the geographical scope, both domestically and cross-countries, for example, by comparing SMEs in Indonesia and other countries to see how cultural factors or trade policies affect the relationship between learning orientation and export performance. In addition, involving companies from different business scales, such as large companies, could provide a more comprehensive perspective. Finally, since cross-sectional data limits the inference of causal relationships between the variables, further research could adopt longitudinal methods, for instance, by collecting data from SMEs over several periods to track changes over time. It would allow for a deeper understanding of the temporal dynamics that occur concerning export performance.

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