

INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED FIRMS: THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE, PROACTIVENESS, AND INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS

DESEMPEÑO INTERNACIONAL DE LAS PEQUEÑAS Y MEDIANAS EMPRESAS: EL
PAPEL DE LA PROACTIVIDAD, LA EXPERIENCIA INTERNACIONAL Y LAS REDES

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to examine the effect of proactive managerial behavior and international business networks on three dimensions of international performance exhibited by an SME. Specifically, the export intensity, speed, and geographical scope of the sales abroad. In addition, we evaluate if managers with international experience take more proactive stances and use international networks when dealing with foreign markets. We tested a research model applying structural equation modeling techniques to a sample of 130 Costa Rican exporting firms. The results reveal that the international experience is not related to the intense use of international networks to deal with foreign markets. Rather, international experience is associated with high levels of proactive stances towards foreign market opportunities, which in turn, positively affect an SME's export intensity. However, the geographical scope of its export sales and the speed of internationalization seem to be unrelated to a manager's level of proactiveness in foreign markets. .

Keywords: International performance, proactiveness, international networks, Small and Medium-sized firms, international experience.



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Resumen

El propósito de esta investigación es examinar el efecto del comportamiento gerencial proactivo y las redes comerciales internacionales en el desempeño internacional exhibido por una Mipyme. Específicamente, la intensidad de exportación, la velocidad y el alcance geográfico de las ventas al exterior. Además, verificamos si los gerentes con experiencia internacional despliegan más posturas proactivas y se valen de redes internacionales. Probamos un modelo de investigación, aplicando técnicas de modelado de ecuaciones estructurales, a una muestra de 130 empresas exportadoras costarricenses. Los resultados revelan que la experiencia internacional no se relaciona con el uso de las redes internacionales para hacer frente a los mercados extranjeros. Más bien, la experiencia internacional está asociada con altos niveles de posturas proactivas hacia las oportunidades de mercado extranjero lo que, a su vez, afecta positivamente la intensidad exportadora de una PYME.

Palabras clave: Desempeño internacional, proactividad, redes internacionales, Mipymes, experiencia internacional.

1. Introduction

The internationalization of Small and Medium-Sized Firms (SMEs) is a topic of thriving research interest as a result of the proliferation of SMEs in export markets (Dimitratos & Li, 2014). Internationalization is regarded as a means of growth and survival for this type of firms (Dutot et al., 2014). Literature on international entrepreneurship acknowledges the impact of managers' social and human capital on the international performance of small and middle-sized firms (Buzavaite & Korsakiene, 2019; Puthusserry et al., 2020; Gamage et al., 2020; Ruzzier et al., 2007). Of particular interest regarding inquiries on the internationalization of SMEs are the impact of a manager's experience and her or his proactive disposition (e.g., Child et al., 2017; Daszkiewicz & Wach, 2012; Gancarczyk & Gancarczyk, 2018). It is widely accepted that a manager's international experience is crucial for a firm's international expansion (e.g., Andersson, 2015; Coviello, 2006; Dominguez, 2018; Musteen et al., 2014; Daszkiewicz & Wach, 2012; Majocchi et al., 2005; Xu et al., 2015). A manager's proactiveness is also considered of paramount importance for a successful internationalization of the firm. In fact, international entrepreneurship is regarded to a great extent as a proactive seeking behavior (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005).

Despite this, the relevance of international experience and proactiveness is not without some critics. It has been shown that SMEs enter foreign markets by using reactive postures instead of being proactive (Bowen, 2019; Caliskan et al., 2006; Kubíčková et al., 2014). Some scholars contend that international experience is neither indispensable nor critical for a firm's successful internationalization (e.g., Andersson, 2015; Dib et al., 2010). Besides, it is somewhat unclear, whether more internationally experienced managers are more likely to actively pursue international undertakings or use network relationships to expand exports sales (Ciravegna et al., 2014; Amal & Freitag Filho, 2010; Clarke et al., 2016). The relevance of international networks for successful export ventures remains controversial (Ciravegna et al., 2014).

This study explores whether the levels of international entrepreneurial

proactiveness exhibited by an SME senior manager and the use of international business networks affect three dimensions of international performance achieved by an SME: the export intensity, the speed of internationalization and the scope of its export sales. In addition, we examine whether more internationally experienced managers are more likely to actively pursue international ventures and use international networks. To achieve this, we carry out empirical re-evaluations of the research model proposed by Ciravegna et al. (2014) previously tested on a sample of 109 Chinese SMEs from one branch of the economy.

We test the hypothesized research model using covaried-based structural equation modeling techniques applied to a sample of 130 Costa Rican firms from diverse branches of the economy. By examining Costa Rican SMEs, we want to provide findings drawn from an emerging economy with burgeoning participation of its SMEs in international markets. Costa Rican exporting SMEs incorporate new products and more destinations in their export basket each year, compared to others in the region (Cepal, 2018). In addition, some scholars urge the generation of research drawn from different contexts, particularly from emerging countries (e.g., Rialp et al., 2014).

Exporting, unlike some other type of strategies, such as foreign direct investments or acquisitions, is the simplest and most affordable way for a SME to expand internationally (Kuivalainen et al., 2013). Therefore, for the purpose of this study we delimit the understanding of the term “internationalization” as the firm’s international expansion of its exporting sales. This inquiry contributes to literature on International Entrepreneurship (IE) by providing empirical evidence suggesting that managerial factors impact the export intensity. It also diverges from prior literature by suggesting that cooperating with international networks is related to international performance.

The rest of this study is organized as follows: First, we present the literature review, the research model along with the hypothesis. Then we describe the research methodology employed and present the results. In the last two sections, we focus on the discussion of our results and outline the conclusion and limitations of this research as well some avenues for future research.

2. Literature and research model

Export seems to be particularly challenging for SMEs (Kuivalainen et al., 2013). Compared with larger firms, SMEs usually face resource constraints, a situation that prevents them from being involved in export operations or possibly limits the scope of their commercial capacity to expand abroad (Suárez-Ortega, & Álamo-Vera, 2005). Due to their relative lack of resources, it is considered that the SME’s human capital, in particular its senior manager, is its major source of competitive advantage in coping with processes of internationalization (e.g., Dimitratos & Li, 2014; Matlay et al., 2006). The SME’s senior manager usually determines whether to start international operations and the scope of the expansion into foreign markets (Achtenhagen, 2011).

The export operation of SMEs requires appropriate competences. The characteristics of a senior manager involved in international business ventures appear to have a significant impact on the international performance of the SMEs (Buzavaite & Korsakiene, 2019). The manager’s international experience and the level of proactive behavior displayed by the manager to cope with export markets are regarded as vital for internationalization (Jones & Casulli, 2014). Literature on international entrepreneurship considers human capital as fundamental in explaining the internationalization of SMEs (Buzavaite & Korsakiene, 2019). Entrepreneurs draw

upon their human capital, that is, their knowledge, skills, and values, to advance the interests of their firms (Ruzzier et. al., 2007). Managers' intentions to pursue export expansion seem to be affected by their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions toward exports. Besides, managers who take a proactive attitude to internationalization leverage a broad range of resources and search for new market opportunities abroad (Ciravegna et al., 2014). Human capital appears to be a salient factor in impacting the identification and exploitation of international business opportunities (Buzavaite & Korsakiene, 2019). The entrepreneur of an SME is considered as a key and unique resource that can become especially influential in the organization (Ruzzier et. al., 2007) and the person that typically makes the decisions about expanding sales abroad and the scope of this expansion (Sandoval-Álvarez, 2022).

Literature on firm internationalization recognizes two general postures that firms adopt when going international; reactive and proactive (Kraus et al., 2017). In general, reactive postures arise from the firm's responses to unintended commercial opportunities across nations' borders (Child & Hsieh, 2014) and from pressures of environmental factors or unfavorable domestic market conditions that push them to consider international markets as an alternative for increasing their commercial operations (Kraus et al., 2017). In contrast, a proactive posture denotes a forward-looking perspective, seizing opportunities by seeking information continuously, acting in anticipation, and taking the initiative in the markets (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001; De Clercq et al. 2005).

Although it is recognized that SME managers can adopt both deliberate and emergent postures when dealing with export opportunities, a significant number of prior studies support the positive impact of a proactive posture (e.g., Arranz & De Arroyabe, 2009; Francioni et al., 2013; Pett et al. 2004; Torkkeli et al., 2021). Notwithstanding, the benefits of displaying a proactive stance towards exporting and what encourages such proactiveness remain topics of ongoing research. Some authors sustain that an entrepreneur who has accumulated international business experience, is more likely to increase his or her conviction in his or her own capacity and skills to operate in international settings, which in turn engenders a predisposition to actively pursue international business endeavors (Sapienza et al., 2014). As they gather more experience and skills to operate in international settings, they will successively enter new markets lying at a greater psychological distance (Sousa & Bradley, 2006). (For an overview of the concept of psychological distance: cf. Child et al., 2009).

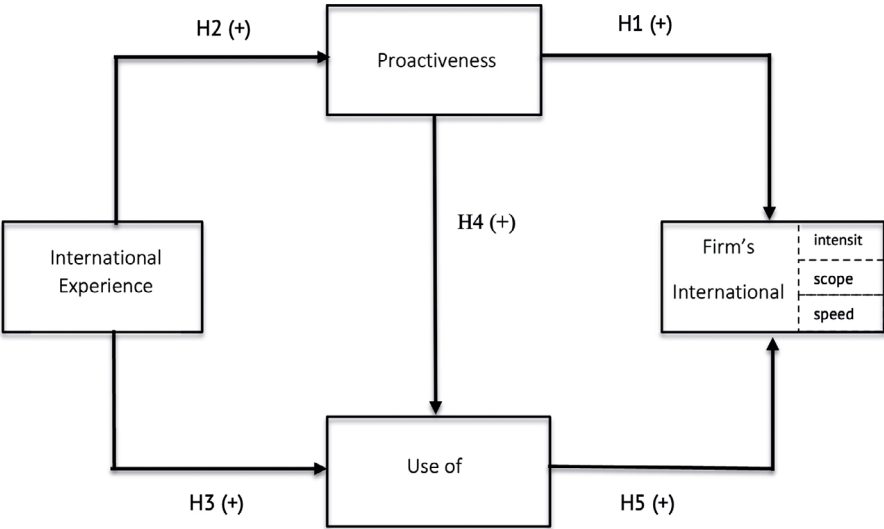
Experiential knowledge in foreign markets is of utmost importance for the expansion of the firm's commercial activities abroad (Daszkiewicz & Wach, 2012). However, other authors have pointed out that international experience is overrated and is neither a crucial entry and expansion into international markets, nor is it necessary to elicit proactive behavior toward seeking and successfully entering export markets (e.g., Dib et al., 2010; Kalinic & Forza, 2012). As the firm engages in foreign markets and export operations, there is a need to acquire additional resources to support these operations. A way to overcome a firm's resource constraints is by building business networks, also referred to as social capital. Hence, social capital is derived from networks and acts as one of the fundamental external resources for internationalization (Chetty & Agndal, 2007). The social capital at the firm's disposal may leverage additional resources (Chetty & Stangl, 2010). The extant literature on international entrepreneurship (IE) also stressed that social capital can be essential for international performance (Dominguez, 2018). For instance, networks may contribute to a faster internationalization speed (Meng et al., 2016), determine the entry and strategy, and enhance a superior international performance (Musteen

et al., 2010; Hagen et al., 2012). Networks shape the foreign market entry strategy (Agndal & Chetty, 2007) and assist firms in extending the international scope for their commercial operations (Hagen et al., 2012).

The effect of social capital on a firm’s internationalization outcomes (i.e., performance, market entry mode, export intensity speed, international scope, among others) have been studied from different perspectives. Those included the diversity and density of the networks (Musteen et al., 2014), the local and international networks (Musteen et al., 2010), the strength of networks (Jack, 2005), among others. International networks might provide access to privileged information of the targeted foreign markets (Solberg & Durrieu, 2006) and facilitate the recognition of new export opportunities (Musteen et al., 2014). Despite that, according to Ciravegna et al., (2014) “there is also scarce evidence on whether the use of networks is mainly a domestic phenomenon, or whether it is often and successfully used to support internationalization” (pp.1082). Likewise, it also remains unclear, “whether more experienced managers are more likely to actively pursue international ventures, or to use networks” (pp.1083).

We conducted an empirical test of the hypothesized research proposed by Ciravegna et al. (2014) in order to examine the plausible effects of managers’ international experience and their international networks on the international performance. The hypothesized model is depicted in Figure 1. Particularly, we explore whether the managers’ international experience and the use of international business networks may affect three dimensions of international performance achieved by a SMEs: the firm’s export intensity, the firm’s speed of internationalization and the geographical scope of its export sales. In addition, we examine whether more internationally experienced managers are more likely to actively pursue international ventures and use international networks. The next section outlines the research hypotheses underpinned in the extant literature.

Figure 1. Research Model (Based on the model by Ciravegna et al., 2014)



3. Research Hypotheses

3.1 Proactiveness and International Performance

Export appears to have high levels of volatility, especially for SMEs, where sales can sharply decrease and unforeseen events can shake the level of international sales achieved (Majocchi et al., 2005). It was noted that entrepreneurs who actively pursue foreign market opportunities display a clear commitment to export operations (Ciravegna et al., 2014) and enable a faster firm internationalization (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). SME managers that show a more proactive posture to cope with exports are likely to outperform others in terms of export intensity, speed, and geographical scope of their international sales (Ciravegna et al., 2014). International entrepreneurship is considered to be a proactive seeking behavior, which implies exploitation of opportunities across national borders (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). We argue that, due to the seemingly high volatility of export volumes, levels of export sales can be achieved and maintained only by displaying a proactive behavior toward foreign markets. We also posit that the more proactive the stance by the senior SME manager in favor of export undertakings, the higher the levels of export intensity displayed by the firm, the greater the geographical scope of its exports, and the shorter the time elapsed in the generation of the first international sales. Accordingly, we posit that:

Hypothesis 1. Levels of proactiveness in pursuing foreign business opportunities exhibited by a senior manager are positively related to the international performance of her or his SME, measured as:

H1a. Level of export intensity achieved by a firm.

H1b. International scope of the export sales achieved by a firm.

H1c. The speed of internationalization shown by the firm.

3.2 International experience and proactiveness

International experience stands out as instrumental for the international expansion of firms (Andersson, 2015). It is assumed that the international experience accumulated by SME managers allows them to develop the skills and confidence to pursue export ventures. Consequently, having international experience encourages a proactive posture to pursue export opportunities. It was shown that entrepreneurs who have had prior international business experience are more prompt to engage in exports (Ucbasaran et al., 2009). According to some scholars, managers with more international business experience may develop a disposition to search for international companies and can generate special skills to identify and exploit opportunities abroad (Sapienza et al., 2014 ; Clercq & Zhao, 2014). Likewise, International business experience enhances the readiness of individuals to seek out international undertaking development (Sapienza et al., 2014). Lastly, international business experience triggers deliberate search and discovery of international opportunities (Chandra et al., 2009). Therefore, we suggest that:

Hypothesis 2. A senior manager's international experience is positively associated with his or her level of proactiveness in pursuing foreign market opportunities.

3.3 International experience and the use of international networks

To reduce the risks and cost of operating in unfamiliar environments, it is assumed that SMEs establish international operations assisted by foreign networks (Ivarsson & Alvstam, 2013). The managers who have dealt longer with international markets are more likely to develop the necessary networks to support the internationalization of

a firm (Ciravegna et al., 2014). Top internationally experienced managers often build strategic relationships with foreign partners which help them to increase and create international growth opportunities for their firms (Zhou et al., 2010).

Moreover, it was argued that individuals with greater international business experience can augment not only their knowledge, but also their firm's network links, enabling them to rely less on their own systematic foreign market analysis (Child et al., 2017). That leads us to consider the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. The use of international networks is more likely to occur as the international experience of a SME manager increases.

3.4 Proactiveness and the use of international networks

Zhou et al. (2010) argued that entrepreneurial action stimulates the development of network relationships to acquire appropriate resources for enhancing the firm's performance. Managers who take a proactive attitude to internationalization are likely to leverage a broad range of resources, including networks, to search for clients in new markets (Ciravegna et al., 2014). Prior research suggests that SME managers tend to be proactive in acquiring resources through their networks to explore foreign markets, particularly in the early stages of their international development (Coviello & Cox, 2006). In addition, based on studies of SMEs in China and Malaysia, Altnaa and colleagues (2021) have shown that SMEs tend to use their extensive social networks to gain new market insights. Coviello (2006) asserted that, with regard to international trade, SMEs are expected to proactively build contacts beyond their initial networks to improve their position and enhance growth opportunities abroad. Accordingly, we posit:

Hypothesis 4. Levels of proactiveness in pursuing international business opportunities exhibited by a senior manager are related to higher intensity of use of international networks.

3.5 The use of international networks and international performance

It was noticed that through international networks firms can gain access to new market knowledge (Chetty & Stangl, 2010) and privileged information (Zhou et al., 2010). Cooperating with international partners abroad can assist SMEs in the recognition of new international opportunities (Musteen et al., 2014). International partners enable firms to accelerate the entry into new international markets (Casillas & Acedo, 2013) and may speed their international expansion (Dominguez, 2018; Coviello, 2006). Martineau and Pastoriza (2016) conducted studies on SMEs' international involvement and found that firms with more extensive use of foreign networks achieve higher levels of export intensity than those SMEs displaying lower use of them. Likewise, empirical research conducted by Musteen and colleagues (2010) showed that exporting SMEs' cooperation with partners abroad can boost their level of export performance. International partners of the targeted international market are able to transfer trustworthiness to firms that want to enter into new foreign markets (Arenius, 2002).

Based on the above, we contend that export performance is stronger for those SMEs whose managers have a more extensive use of international networks. Consequently:

Hypothesis 5. The use of international networks by a senior manager is positively related to a superior international performance of SMEs, measured as:

H1a. Level of export intensity achieved by the firm.

- H1b. International scope of the export sales achieved by the firm.
- H1c. The speed of internationalization shown by the firm.

4. Methods

4.1 Sampling and data collection

This study is on SMEs, that is, firms with less than 250 employees, and with annual sales not exceeding 50 million dollars or the equivalent (e.g., Acedo & Florin, 2007; Dutot et al., 2014). We sampled only SMEs that export, regardless of the level of export intensity they might exhibit. SMEs listed in the Costa Rican Industrial Chamber of Commerce and Chamber of Technology were used as sample frames because most of its affiliates are exporting SMEs. With the assistance of the two chambers of commerce, a total of 557 exporting SMEs were identified and invited to participate in this research. A web-based questionnaire was designed and sent to the founder or senior manager. The web-based questionnaire was facilitated in Spanish. To reduce possible response bias, the participants received an invitation letter emphasizing the importance of answering every question frankly and were also allowed to complete the questionnaire anonymously (cf., Chung & Monroe, 2003). The collection period extended from August 2018 to January 2019. A total of 211 questionnaires were returned. Out of these, 81 questionnaires were discarded due to the considerable portion of unanswered questions. In the end we yielded a total of 130 exploitable questionnaires (effective response rate 23%).

The sample comprises 121 (93%) SME founders and 9 (7%) top SME managers. A total of 124 (95.4%) are males and 6 (4.6%) are females. The average experience in international business is 12 years, (s.d.: 10.5, range from 2-44 respectively). The average number of firm employees is 43 (s.d.: 64.0 range 4-246). The average ratio of international sales over total sales is 28.1% (s.d. 29.2% range: 4-100). and the averaged international sales scope of this sample is 4 countries (s.d.: 4 range: 1-20). The types of industries included in this sample are: Packing and plastic, chemical, metal-mechanic, foods and beverage, legal services, software development, IT, and multimedia.

4.2 Variables and Measures

Although this study consists of empirical re-evaluations of the research model proposed by Ciravegna colleagues (2014), tested on a sample of Costa Rican SMEs (previously tested on a Chinese SMEs), we must acknowledge that, in the context of Latin American countries, some other variables such as the availability of financial resources (Galán et al., 2014) and the participation of SMEs in global value chains (GVC) (Avendaño et al., 2013) are considered vital for SMEs to cope successfully with the internationalization process and penetrate international markets (Stezano, 2013). Concerning firms' resource availability, we included and controlled for firm size, a variable often used in prior research as proxy of firm resources at disposal for international markets (Sandoval & Rank, 2021). With regard to GVCs, these consist of pre-established governance structures that are usually managed by a larger corporation, usually called the "leading company" (Stanley, 2010), where the strategic decisions impact the GVCs depend on this leading firm and not on the SMEs, which often provide services to it. Because our study aims to examine the effect a manager's personal characteristics (i.e., proactiveness, and business experience) on international performance of a SME, we selected only SMEs where strategic decisions to export depend on the firm leader, with the capability to make decisions freely and independently from any legal or managerial influence of another larger firm. Therefore,

SMEs with managerial dependency on GVCs were not included in this study.

Following Xu and colleagues (2015), international experience was assessed by asking the participants to provide the total number of years of experience in international business, including the time before founding their firm. Proactiveness toward international markets was measured using the scale developed by Zhou et al. (2010). SME managers were asked to rate five statements on a 7-point Likert Scale. Cronbach's α yield = .92 suggests internal consistency.

Use of international networks was assessed using a three-item scale used by Zhou et al. (2010). This scale measures the extensiveness of utilizing cooperative relationships with foreign business partners. Cronbach's α = 0.84, suggests internal consistency. Firms' international performance was assessed using three multidimensional measures of international performance: export intensity, international scope, and speed of internationalization as described by Ciravegna et al. (2014), and which refers to: the ratio of a firm's international sales to total sales, the number of countries they export to, and the period of time elapsed between the firm's foundation and the initiation of the export activity, respectively.

We controlled for possible influence of the firm's size and years serving foreign markets on the model. Larger firms tend to have a better international performance (O'Cass & Weerawardena, 2009). It was noted that firms with more years dealing with exports frequently achieve higher export intensity and a larger scope of their exports sales (Naldi, 2008). We operationalized the firm's size as the total number of firm employees, which is a measure often used as a proxy of a firm's lack of resources (e.g., Acedo & Florin, 2006; Song & Moon, 2019). Firm age in export was operationalized as the number of years since the first export assignment (Sharma et al., 2002). We also controlled for governmental support to export (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2006) and for industry branches, particularly non-technological-technological-based and technological-based branches because the latter tend to involve more international operations than others (Buxmann et al., 2013).

4.3 Reliability and validity of the constructs

Prior to testing the model, we checked for construct reliability, convergent validity, and non-multicollinearity of the predicting variables. Construct Reliability, that is, the extent to which all measures consistently represent the same construct (Hair et al., 2010), was assessed by computing the composite reliability (C.R). Values of C.R. higher than 0.7 are evidence of multi-item consistency (Nunnally, 1978). The C.R. for use of international networks and proactiveness yielded .84 and .92 respectively. We verified for convergent validity using CFA. It is demonstrated when item loadings are significant on the respective and a priori defined variables (Hair, 2010). All item loadings of our reflective factor were statistically significant at $p < .001$ within the corresponding variable. In addition, we assessed the average variance extracted (AVE) to check whether the standardized estimates of the items are higher than the suggested threshold, ($AVE > .50$ and ideally close to .70). The AVE value for the variable use of international networks yielded .63 and for proactiveness .69. These results provide strong evidence that items pertaining to one specific construct share a high proportion of variance in common. We examined non-multicollinearity among predictor variables by assessing the variance inflation factors (VIF). VIF scores yielded 3.00, 2.77, and 1.21. Because all values are lower than the threshold of 5.0 (Hair et al., 2010), multicollinearity does not seem to present a problem.

4.4 Assessment of Model Fit

The model was tested with Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), using Amos 28, because it enables us to compute all causal relationships in the model at once, and makes the relative significance of every relationship evident (Hair et al., 2010). We started by checking the Model Fit: The assessment of the minimum discrepancy was CMIN/d.f=1.287 (chi-square value divided by degree of freedom) and is lower than 3, suggesting an acceptable level of model fit. (Byrne, 2016). Chi-square values, however, are fairly susceptible to changes in sample size and model complexity. Because of this limitation, a mix of indices is also recommended, in order to make much more reasonable judgments about the goodness-of-fit of models (Weiber & Mülhhaus, 2014). Taking into consideration the size of our sample, the model complexity and assessment of multivariate normality of the data, the mix of indices to evaluate the goodness-of-fit suggested by Weiber and Mülhhaus (2014) and Hair and colleagues (2010) are the following: [TLI, IFI, CFI, RNI (with cut-offs $\geq .95$), SRMR ($\leq .08$) and RMSEA ($\leq .06$)]. Table 1 summarizes the corresponding scores and benchmarks of these indices. All results indicate that our model fits the data quite well.

Table 1. Assessment of Goodness- of- fit Statistics

Indices of fit	THRESHOLD	SCORE VALUE
Tucker- Lewis Index (TLI)	$\geq .95$	.973
Incremental Index of Fit (IFI)	$\geq .95$	.987
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	$\geq .95$	.986
Relative Noncentrality Index (RNI)	$\geq .95$	.986
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	$\leq .08$	.047
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	$\leq .06$	.037

Note: Indices and thresholds based on Hair, Black, Babin & Andreson (2010); Weiber & Mülhhaus (2014)

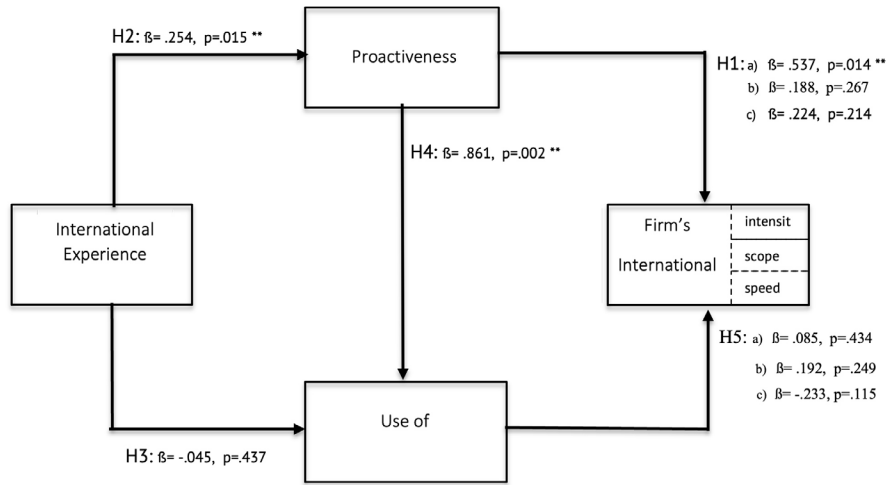
We evaluate the assumption of multivariate normality in the data by assessing the Mardia's normalized coefficient (δ^2). This coefficient yielded 8.85 points. According to Byrne (2016), δ^2 values higher than 5.0 indicate a slight departure of the non-multivariate normality in the data.

Given that the assumption of multivariate normality was not met, we followed Byrne (2016) and carried out bootstrap procedures in two steps: First, the Bollen-Stine bootstrap must be invoked to confirm if the model fits the dataset well ($p > .05$). The result of this first procedure was $p = .239$., confirming the suitability of the model. Second, we applied bootstrap procedures. This step enables us to get robust and accurate assessments of the significance levels for standard errors and parameter estimates (Byrne, 2016). Nevitt and Hancock (2001) found that at least 250 resamples are required to obtain high accuracy of estimates, p -values, and intervals of confidence (cf., Nevitt & Hancock, 2001). Consequently, we carried out the bootstrap procedure applying 1,000 resamples.

4.5 Test results

Figure 2 sums up the results of hypothesis testing applying 1,000 resamples. Results show that the relationship between managerial proactiveness and firm export intensity is statistically significant ($\beta = .537, p < .05$). Thus, hypothesis H1a was supported. No relationships were found between managerial proactiveness, international scope, and speed of internationalization. H1b and H1c were not supported. As for hypothesis H2, it is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .254, p < .05$), meaning that H2 was also supported. H4 assumes that managerial proactiveness exerts an impact on extensive use of international networks. This relationship was also significant ($\beta = .18, p < .001$). Hypotheses H5, H3 and were not supported. No direct effect was found between our key variables and international scope and speed of internationalization.

Figure 2. Results of model test



Source: Author's own

In general, our results reveal that SMEs whose senior managers search actively for foreign market opportunities achieve higher levels of export intensity than those who exhibited less proactive postures. This relationship appears to be positive and significantly strong. Our results underline that a senior manager's international experience exerts an influence on the degree of manager proactiveness in pursuing foreign market opportunities, which in turn, is positive and strongly associated with the extensive use of international networks. However international networks developed by the manager are not related to the international performance achieved by the firms. With respect to control variables, results indicate that a firm's size and age are related to international scope, while industry branch, governmental support, and a firm's size are related to speed of internationalization (see Table 2). The findings and contributions of this study and its results are discussed in greater detail in the Discussion and Conclusions sections below.

Table 2. Factor Loadings of Standardized Estimates, p-values, and confidence intervals

Hypothesized Relationships		H	Estimate	Lower	Upper	P
Proactiveness	--> Export intensity	H1a **	.537	.162	.784	.014
Proactiveness	--> International scope	H1b	.188	-.176	.540	.267
Proactiveness	--> Speed of internationalization	H1c	.224	-.121	.536	.214
International experience	--> Proactiveness	H2 **	.254	.065	.432	.015
International experience	--> Use of networks	H3	-.045	-.165	.068	.437
Proactiveness	--> Use of intl. Networks	H4 **	.861	.771	.943	.002
Use of Int. Networks	--> Export intensity	H5a	.085	-.166	.362	.434
Use of Int. Networks	--> International scope	H5b	.194	-.132	.478	.249
Use of Int. Networks	--> Speed of internationalization	H5c	-.233	-.506	.045	.115
Control variables:						
Firm's size	--> Export intensity		.007	-.164	.169	.919
Industry branch	--> Proactiveness		-.023	-.235	.190	.828
Firm's size	--> International scope		.309	.053	.531	.025
Governmental support	--> Speed of internationalization		-.281	-.453	-.147	.001
Firm's age in export	--> Proactiveness		.334	.196	.482	.002
Governmental support	--> Export intensity		.072	-.128	.298	.473
Governmental support	--> International scope		-.001	-.143	.177	.887
Firm's size	--> Speed of internationalization		.261	.010	.521	.039

Notes: P= p-value; H= Hypothesis * = Supported hypotheses

5. Discussion

Our study yields several implications: It supports prior studies that have shown conclusively that managers who have pursued business markets opportunities more determinedly or have exhibited more proactive stances towards foreign markets accomplish high levels of export intensity regardless of the firm size and firm age (e.g., Amal & Freitag Filho, 2010; Gil-Barragan, & Palacios-Chacon, 2018; Safari et al., 2021). It also confirms the results achieved by Ciravegna and colleagues (2014) and offers empirical support to the assertion from Frese & Gielnik (2014) who regard the entrepreneur's action as the key factor that ultimately affects the firm's international growth. Export sales are commonly volatile specially for SMEs (Majocchi et al., 2005). Unexpected events could propitiate or hinder a firm's internationalization and performance. From a practical viewpoint, it implies that substantial levels of export intensity and sales can be achieved and maintained only by applying a proactive posture when coping with international market opportunities and the willingness to take actions persistently.

Unlike the results obtained by Ciravegna and colleagues (2014), we found no empirical evidence suggesting that a manager's proactiveness is associated with the international scope of a firm's export sales. Regarding the expected effect of a manager's proactiveness on the speed of internationalization, this effect was clearly not supported, as also occurred in the study carried out by Ciravegna and colleagues

(2014). We offer some potential explanations for these results. First, paraphrasing Ciravegna and colleagues' arguments, one can surmise that SME managers come across international opportunities instead of proactively seeking them. Consequently, faster internationalization among SMEs can be the result of random events rather than seizing opportunities by seeking information and new clients abroad deliberately and proactively. That leads us to think that the speed of internationalization might be the result of serendipitous entries into the foreign market or the discovery of unintended export opportunities, as some other authors have sustained (e.g., Crick & Crick, 2014; Hilmerston et al., 2021; Papaioannou, 2020).

Second, the international scope and speed of internationalization might be determined by a lack of resources and time. Although it was not hypothesized, our results suggest that speed and geographical scope of the SMEs' international sales are strongly associated with firm size and firm age, that is, with firm factors instead. Conceptually, export expansion takes time. Presumably, SMEs that have operated longer in foreign markets are expected to have a broader geographic scope of their export sales. In this vein, SME internationalization is often viewed as a gradual and time-consuming process, where older firms tend to grow more internationally (Naldi, 2008). Likewise, the expansion into other cultural and economic contexts, different from the domestic environment, seems to be conditioned by the firm's availability of resources. Larger firms are predisposed to be more international since they control more resources for international ventures (Freixanet & Renart, 2020; Naldi, 2008). The allocation of resources to support export endeavors must be made in the present and continued without interruption (Navarro et al., 2010). As a result, we speculate that the speed of internationalization of the geographical scope of exports could be more related to firm size and firm age rather than managerial characteristics. It is important to recall that using covaried-based structural equation modeling techniques, enables us to compute all causal relationships in the model at once, making the relative significance of every relationship evident (cf., Hair, et al., 2010).

We contribute to the export venture literature and research on IE by providing evidence supporting these assumptions, both theoretically and empirically, but obtained from studies carried out in Latin America. As pointed out earlier, empirical research on IE carried out in emerging countries is relatively scarce compared to the great deal of research concentrated on more developed economies (for a recent systematic review of SME internationalization, c.f. Steintenhäuser et al., 2021). Also, these results are in line and reinforce the findings revealed by Ciravegna and colleagues (2014) in their study on Chinese SMEs.

On another note, we explored whether international experience is associated with an extensive use of foreign networks but we did not find empirical evidence supporting this relationship on our sample of Costa Rican SMEs. Nevertheless, the same result was obtained by Ciravegna and Colleagues (2014) on Chinese SMEs. Our result is opposed to findings from prior studies showing that internationally experienced managers do tend to build strategic relationships with international partners to enhance the international networks (e.g., Zhao et al., 2010; Child et al., 2017). One possible explanation of the divergence of these results is that our result may depict a specific pattern of Costa Rican SMEs and their context. Costa Rican managers might be more inclined to not cooperate with international networks or use other methods to cope with exports. Another explanation can be found in the recent studies by Jeong et al. (2019), who assert that the influence of business networks on international performance could be weakened as international experience increases. Our findings empirically support their assertion, while it is opposed to the findings

of other scholars (cf. Ivarsson & Alvstam, 2013; Zhou et al., 2010). Another plausible explanation of our result might be substantiated in light of the cognition perspective of SME internationalization, particularly the international cognition (e.g., McKelvie, Haynie, & Gustavsson, 2011; Sandoval & Rank, 2021). According to this perspective, international experience can elicit in managers a greater sense of controllability over the export business and foster a great perception of self-efficacy with regard to the internationalization processes. The perception of international self-efficacy stems from the international experience, and a high level of self-efficacy could prevent internationally experienced managers from considering seeking support (such as partnerships and networks) due to their greater conviction in their own abilities to face the expansion of exports (Sandoval & Rank, 2021). As for now, we can only speculate. It remains a controversial topic and may deserve further research. We find no empirical evidence to support the assumption that an intensive use of international networks leads to a higher level of international intensity, a higher speed of internationalization, or a greater geographical scope of a firm's export sales. Although this research result is in line with those of Ciravegna and Colleagues (2014), the result is unexpected and contrasts with the existing literature and the general idea given by IE academics, who theorize that business networks are vital for the internationalization of SMEs. Given this result, one could simply assume that alliances with foreign networks do not represent an effective means for the internationalization of SMEs. However, another plausible explanation may lie in the fact that the impact of international networks on international performance may not be conceptually conceived as direct antecedent as Ciravegna and colleagues (2010) did. Rather than a direct effect, it is conceivable that the impact on international performance could be indirect, as suggested by Stoian et al. (2017). In this same sense, some other authors have theorized in their models, but not yet proven empirically, that social ties or business networks could be considered as moderating elements, capable of enhancing the speed of internationalization, and the scope and commitment to exports (c.f. Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). As previously mentioned, cooperative relationships with foreign partners to access resources and privileged knowledge about foreign markets even allow trust and credibility to be transferred to companies that have just entered international markets, since companies with various cooperative relationships in destination markets are considered more trustworthy than companies without them (Arenius, 2002). Despite this, some SMEs prefer to dispense with establishing cooperation networks in favor of maintaining control over export operations (Cerrato & Piva, 2010). Furthermore, building relationships with foreign partners could be difficult due to cultural differences (Ojala, 2015), whereby the use of foreign partners and the intensity of use vary from company to company. It is a deliberate strategic choice and not a prerequisite for the internationalization of the company (Kalinic & Forza, 2012). This has important implications for IE researchers, because it seems to be persuasive to conceive international networks as an intervening or moderating variable enabling SMEs to enhance the effect of proactiveness on the international performance, but not necessarily as a direct antecedent of international performance.

6. Conclusion, limitations, and avenues for future research

We found empirical results that provide overall support for our arguments that an SME manager's international experience is associated with a higher level of proactiveness in pursuing foreign business opportunities exhibited by the manager, which, in turn, is positively related with the export intensity exhibited by her or his

SME. The geographical scope of export sales and the speed of internationalization of an SME seem to be unrelated to a manager's level of proactiveness pursuing foreign business opportunities. Rather, they appear to be related to a firm's characteristics. The use of international networks by a senior manager seems to be unrelated to a superior international performance in terms of export intensity, geographical scope of the export sales, and the speed of internationalization of an SME.

There are some limitations of our study that should be mentioned. First, in our research we used self-reports that, although they are conventionally used and reliable, could be exposed to a common methods bias (cf. Podsakoff et al., 2003). We recognize that these self-report-based measures are not always free of bias, which may affect study results, but may reduce their effects. For this reason, we took a series of measures to mitigate them, measures that were detailed in the "methods". But it is important not to ignore the existence of this possible limitation of the study.

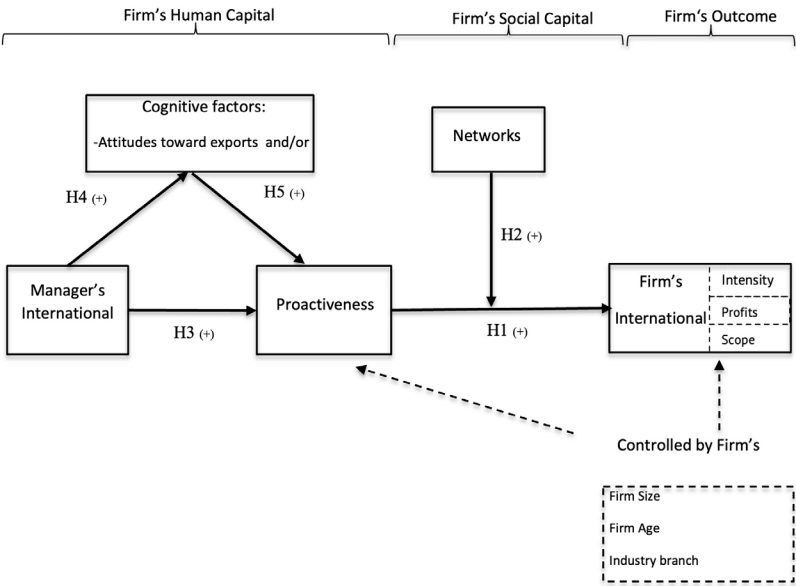
Second, it is a context-specific study, so the possibility that the findings may represent patterns particular to the SME sample and the country is not ruled out. Therefore, generalization of the results is not feasible. And third, it is about the empirical verification of a preconceived model to be tested in another context, in this case Costa Rica. Although the results obtained were very similar to those of previous studies, we recognize that this research model in question partially contributes to some factors that may affect the international performance of SMEs. The internationalization of SMEs is a complex issue that needs to be investigated from different approaches and conceptual theoretical frameworks.

Finally, we offer some potential avenues for future research. Future research could create and empirically verify models that additionally incorporate human capital factors other than experience (i.e., perceptions, attitudes, and other cognitive factors), which are believed to have a powerful effect on managerial decisions and actions for internationalization of SMEs. Some academics highlight that, although experience is considered a fundamental factor for internationalization, little is known about how international experience helps the international expansion of SMEs, and this question remains uninvestigated (Jones & Casulli, 2014). According to Jones & Casulli, (2014), the impact of international experience could be not strictly direct, and the arguments in favor of international experience remain only implicit. Cognitive elements appear to be important avenues for understanding international entrepreneurship behaviors and the reasoning pathway the internationalization behavior (Jones & Casulli, 2014). Other studies demonstrate that SME managers successfully enter to new foreign markets by acting proactively without having prior international business experience (i.e., Kalinic & Forza; 2012). Applying cognition frameworks to internationalization of SMEs is a promising field of research (cf. Acedo & Florin, 2006; Sandoval & Rank, 2021). In this sense, it would be advisable to carry out more exhaustive studies to determine if the effect of international experience on international proactivity is mediated by cognitive factors (i.e., perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs), for example, positive or negative attitudes towards expanding export operations, perceptions of entrepreneurial self-efficacy, or level of risk perception with respect to international markets.

It seems also appropriate to investigate whether a company's social capital (i.e., international networks, cooperation with international business partners) hinders or encourages the international performance of SMEs and test an indirect and moderating effect of social capital on the international results of the firm. Also, it seems convenient to incorporate in the studies the plausible effects of the different characteristics of network relationships, such as diversity of networks, strength of

the networks, or even personal networks vs. professionals. In this regard, the work of Musteen and colleagues (2014) might be a good start. Based on our findings and discussion, we propose a new research model, as depicted in Figure 3. We also hope that our findings and suggestions can inspire researchers to continue studying the internationalization of SMEs from different perspectives and research models supported by comprehensive theoretical frameworks.

Figure 3. Hypothesized research model



Conflict of interest

The authors of this manuscript state that there are no conflicts of interest with any entity or institution, or of a personal nature in this publication.

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