



The Effect of Marketing Mix and Specialized Knowledge on the Export Performance of SMEs Exporting Dry Fruits

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Abstract

Export is a crucial driver of economic growth in various countries and significantly contributes to a country's entry into global markets and enhances economic success. In developing countries such as Iran, economic and social development programs prioritize the expansion of exports, particularly high value added agricultural products. The growth in non-oil exports, such as dried fruits, and the entry of domestic producers into new global markets have led to an increased demand for Iran's export products. This has also resulted in higher production levels, increased employment opportunities, and higher value added in the related activities. To enhance export performance, which is a crucial measure of a company's success in utilizing its resources and capabilities in the international arena over a specific period of time, it is important to focus on improving marketing strategies and specialized knowledge. Therefore, this research aims to examine the impact of marketing mix and specialized marketing knowledge on the export performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved in exporting dried fruits in Mashhad, Iran in 2022. A total of 80 questionnaires were distributed among senior managers, board members, and business managers of dried fruits SMEs using the available sampling method. Structural equation modeling was employed for data analysis and test of research hypotheses. The statistical data and structural equation modeling revealed that the joint impact of marketing mix and specialized marketing knowledge has a positive and significant influence on export performance. In order to improve the company's profitability, it is essential for senior managers and sales managers to recognize the significance of these two factors and undergo relevant training to acquire the necessary skills. Moreover, managers should make effective use of appropriate distribution channels to expand their exports. Simultaneously, they should consider adapting product quality and packaging to align with the preferences of foreign buyers.

Keywords: Dried fruit, Export, Export performance, Marketing mix, Structural equation

JEL classification: C12, M30, Q13

Introduction

Export plays a crucial role in enabling companies to expand their sales and profitability in the global markets. Achieving exceptional performance in exports is an importance objective for both the private and

public sectors. By increasing exports, employment opportunities are created, social welfare is enhanced, and standards of living could be improved. Moreover, it leads to higher productivity, income generation, and development of national industries (Bashir

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Khodaparasti *et al.*, 2020). Despite the significance of exports in a country's economy, domestic and global restrictions and environmental changes often pose challenges for exporting companies. These challenges necessitate long-term planning to overcome the problems facing companies effectively. International exporters must adopt long-term strategies to ensure their participation in the global market and ensure satisfactory profits (Morgan *et al.*, 2004). The export of non-oil products, such as dried fruits, contributes significantly to economic growth and increasing value added through various ways in

some developing countries such as Iran. These include attracting foreign exchange, stimulating production, reducing average production costs, capitalizing on economies of scale, and leveraging the country's relative advantages (Rahim Nia and Sadeghian, 2011). According to statistics from 2019, in Iran, the total export volume of non-oil goods (excluding luggage) reached 113,189 thousand tons with a value of 34,861 million dollars. However, this represents a decline of 15.41% in weight and 14.97% in value compared to 2018 (Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration, 2020).

Table 1-Non-oil exports of goods (excluding luggage trade) during t 2016-2020 in Iran (Weight and Value)

Year	The amount of export		Percentage changes compared to the previous years
2016	Weight*(thousand tons)	129892	38.32
	Value*(million dollars)	44042	3.80
2017	Weight(thousand tons)	132882	2.30
	Value(million dollars)	46982	6.68
2018	Weight(thousand tons)	117961	11.22
	Value(million dollars)	44667	4.92
2019	Weight(thousand tons)	133813	13.88
	Value(million dollars)	40669	7.26
2020	Weight(thousand tons)	113189	15.41
	Value(million dollars)	34861	14.97

Source: Iran Customs Administration, * Weight in thousand tons and Value in million dollars

Table 1 shows that non-oil exports have experienced a significant decline during 2016-2020 in Iran. This decline poses a threat to both the private and government sectors in the international market, ultimately leading to a decrease in overall exports and declining economic growth. In order to survive and improve this condition of exports, the private sector must embrace innovation, competition, and creativity. The international economic system relies much on the participation of the private sector, with most economic activities entrusted to them (Ahad Motlaqi and Saifi Asl, 2017).

Furthermore, the food industry sector (specifically dry fruits) have a great potential, accounting for 11% of non-oil product exports (Statistics of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, 2019).

Therefore, understanding the challenges

faced by small and medium-sized enterprises exporting dry fruits is crucial for increasing export volumes and export value of them. Additionally, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in business development and accessing global markets (Bianchi and Wickramasekera, 2016). These companies play a crucial role in global economic growth, as they possess varying levels of capital, workforce, number of products, and financial turnover. However, they also face with several challenges when it comes to exporting. These challenges include financial issues, an imbalance between the country's industrial growth and international industrial development, a lack of understanding of foreign markets and global economic transformations, as well as a lack of experience in international affairs such as negotiation methods, contract agreements, and legal matters. These

challenges significantly impact the export performance of these companies (Rahmany Youshanlouei *et al.*, 2016). For small and medium-sized exporters, it is essential to have a clear goal of connecting with the global market and then determining the company's objectives and strategies to achieve them. It is important to note that export marketing goes beyond simply finding buyers or importers in the target country; it also involves effectively implementing protocols outlined in a well-structured plan to ensure success in global markets (Nilipour Tabatabai and Ismailzadeh, 2014).

Export performance serves as a vital indicator for measuring the success of a company's export activities (Beleska and Spasova, 2014). It refers to the extent to which a company achieves its goals when exporting products to foreign markets (Faryabi *et al.*, 2017). To achieve success in exporting and competing in global markets, export companies must fully utilize their resources and facilities to establish a strong presence. The measurement of export performance encompasses both quantitative and qualitative variables (Qaldati and Movasagh, 2017). Export performance is influenced by various factors, including marketing mix, knowledge management activities, export innovation, and specialized marketing knowledge. The marketing mix comprises controllable marketing variables that the company combines to cater to the target market. Essentially, it encompasses all the activities undertaken by the industry or company to influence product demand (Qudousi *et al.*, 2014). The marketing mix emphasizes the effective utilization of four components: product, price, distribution, and promotion (Mahmoudi *et al.*, 2018).

Marketing knowledge management pertains to a specific area of knowledge that relates to an organization's marketing processes (Rahimpour and Rohbakhsh, 2021). Hence, it has the potential to impact the overall performance of an organization. Specialized marketing knowledge plays a crucial role in various aspects such as generating new ideas and products tailored to individual customers,

understanding the target market and customer preferences, building trust with customers, reducing problem-solving time, and implementing effective marketing strategies (Karampour and Ebrahimi, 2014). Given that enhancing export performance for companies involved in international trade leads to currency gains and improves the country's commercial standing, it is essential to consider factors that influence export performance. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the factors that contribute to improving the export performance of small and medium-sized companies in the dry food industry operating in foreign markets. Additionally, within non-oil products, the food industry sector holds significant export potential in Iran. In 2019, Iran's dried fruit exports reached 776 thousand tons with a value of 2036 million dollars according to statistics from the Customs Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khorasan Razavi province alone contributes approximately 4.5% of the country's dried fruit exports by weight, with notable production capacities for products like saffron (300.94 tons), pistachios (87437 tons), raisins (357026 tons), and other dried fruits (59000 tons) (Ministry of Agriculture Jihad Statistics, 2019). The potential of the sector in ensuring the country's commercial position in international markets highlights the need for further investigation. Previous research in this field has overlooked important aspects such as strategic orientation, specifically the "marketing mix" and "specialized marketing knowledge." This study aims to address this gap by examining and evaluating these dimensions. The research focuses on small and medium-sized companies in Khorasan-Razavi province, known for its dry fruit production and export. The study area is Mashhad city, which has a significant number of active companies involved in exporting these products.

Despite previous research on export performance, international companies still encounter challenges in this area (Faryabi *et al.*, 2019). Evaluating a commercial company's success in exporting can be done by assessing its performance and export function (Cavusgil and Zou, 1994). Export performance refers to

the outcomes of an organization's activities in export markets (Sousa Carlos, 2005). In a study conducted by Altern and Todran (2015), the impact of customer orientation on export performance was examined. The researchers also considered company size and environmental uncertainties as additional variables. The findings revealed that the relationship between exporter's customer orientation and the customer's ability to pay is fully explained by behavioral commitment and communication. In another study by Ndiaye *et al.* (2018), the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in emerging and developing economies was investigated. The researchers examined indicators based on 80 potential factors derived from various aspects such as company characteristics, finance, informal factors, infrastructure, innovation, technology, regulation, tax, trade, and labor in SMEs. The data analysis results indicated that the use of email for interactions with customers or suppliers had a positive impact on annual employment growth for medium-sized companies but not for small companies. Behzadnia and Sanoubar (2018) conducted a research with a focus on entrepreneurial companies exporting agricultural products from Iran. The findings indicated that the impact of marketing capabilities on a company's export performance is not direct, but rather indirect through the creation of competitive advantages. It was found that marketing capabilities directly influence competitive advantages, which in turn directly affect export performance. Sinkovics *et al.* (2018) conducted a study on small and medium exporting companies, revealing that export experience and commitment reduce both domestic and foreign export barriers for managers of SMEs based in England. In another study Bakhtiari and Bakshshandeh (2019) examined variables such as export commitment, perceived market distance, pre-export issues, and marketing mix adaptation, all leading to export performance. The results demonstrated a significant and positive relationship between marketing mix adaptation and export performance. Gupta and Chauhan (2020) explored the environmental

factors influencing foreign trade in both developing and developed countries. Their results revealed that innovation, marketing, and network capabilities have a positive impact on the export performance of small companies. Additionally, the research clarified the significance of these capabilities in enhancing export performance across various industries for small and medium-sized enterprises. Aghazadeh *et al.* (2020), examined the influence of organizational factors such as relationship quality, competitor orientation, customer orientation, and market orientation on export performance. They specifically focused on the company's commitment to exporting. Their findings indicated that three factors - customer-centered approach, market-centered approach, and competitor-centered approach - were positively correlated with export performance. However, there was no relationship between quality and export performance. Another study by Amoamoha and Yazdani (2022), investigated the impact of marketing capabilities on export performance. The researchers also examined how competitive strategy, positional advantage, bilateral innovation, and marketing capabilities interacted with each other. The results demonstrated that strengthening marketing capabilities and leveraging positional advantage can enhance export performance. Overall, both studies highlight the importance of innovation, marketing capabilities, competitive strategy, and positional advantage in improving the export performance of companies. Mohammadi *et al.* (2019), showed that marketing strategies of differentiation, market development, and product development had a significant positive effect on the export performance of saffron companies in Iran.

The background review of the research indicates that various factors, such as the marketing mix and marketing strategies significantly impact export performance. Additionally, possessing specialized marketing knowledge plays a crucial role in achieving success and influencing the export performance of companies. Given the significance of dry fruit exporting companies in the realm of

exports and the lack of sufficient studies and research in the field of dry fruit export, this study aims to examine the influence of two important variables - marketing mix and specialized marketing knowledge - on the export performance of SMEs active on dry fruit export in Mashhad in 2022.

Methodology and Data

This research focuses on analyzing the factors that impact the export performance of SMEs in Mashhad's food industry, specifically, those involved in exporting dry food products. The research was conducted in Mashhad city and involved interviews and questionnaires to establish relationships between variables. The target population consisted of senior managers, board members, and business managers from SMEs engaged in the export of dry food products in Mashhad. To ensure convenience and maximize effectiveness, an availability sampling method was employed. Out of the 87 active dry fruit export companies in Mashhad, 80 questionnaires were distributed among senior managers and business managers. Ultimately, 52 completed questionnaires were returned and considered for analysis, while the remaining questionnaires were disregarded due to non-completion or non-return. The research questionnaire consists of two parts: general information and specialized information. The questions in the questionnaire are presented in a spectrum and multiple-choice format. The hypotheses related to the impact of marketing mix and specialized knowledge were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The analysis and interpretation of the structural equation model were conducted in two stages: first, the measurement model was examined, followed by the analysis of the structural model. The measurement model aimed to assess the weights and loadings of the underlying variables, while the structural model focused on examining the path coefficients between these variables (Fornell and Lacker, 1981). Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze demographic characteristics, while inferential statistics were used for analyzing data at the

level of structural equation modeling. The software tools utilized for data analysis were SPSS 26 and Smart PLS3.

Data and variables

In order to assess the factorial validity of the questionnaire, two statistical tests were conducted: the KMO index and Bartlett's significance test of sphericity. The findings are presented in Table 2. The KMO index serves as a measure of sampling adequacy, ranging from zero to one. A value close to one indicates that the data is suitable for factor analysis, while a value typically below 0.5 suggests that the factor analysis results may not be appropriate for the given data. Both Bartlett's test and the KMO index were used as indicators of sampling adequacy, and the results indicate favorable levels for both measures. Specifically, all variables had KMO values exceeding 0.5, and Bartlett's test yielded a significance value below 0.05

Once the sample size was confirmed to be appropriate, we proceeded to analyze the factor loading of the items. Additionally, we assessed the reliability of the questionnaire by employing Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The obtained values exceeded 0.7, indicating that the measurement tool possesses the necessary reliability. These results are presented in Table 3.

The first step in the structural equation method involves evaluating the research measurement model. This entails determining whether the observed variables accurately measure the theoretical concepts. To assess construct validity, two measures are used: convergent validity and divergent validity. Convergent validity is confirmed when factor loadings exceed 0.5 and the AVE index is above 0.5. The AVE index ensures that at least 0.5% of the variance in a construct is accounted for by the items used to define it. The results of this index are reported in Table 4. Divergent validity is established when the correlation value between two variables is lower than a specified threshold value. The results of this index are reported in Table 5.

Table 2- Results of confirmatory factor analysis of questionnaire items

Variable name	Dimensions	Object	Operational burden	KMO	Variance explained	Bartlett's test
Marketing mix	Product	pro1	0.884	0.817	0.781	0.000
		pro2	0.895			
		pro3	0.895			
		pro4	0.860			
	Price	pri1	0.865	0.778	0.728	0.000
		pri2	0.836			
		pri3	0.834			
		pri4	0.879			
	Place	pla1	0.820	0.691	0.748	0.000
		pla2	0.675			
		pla3	0.751			
	Promotion	promo1	0.796	0.698	0.741	0.000
promo2		0.661				
promo3		0.768				
Marketing expertise	-	kno1	0.712	0.924	0.758	0.000
		kno2	0.815			
		kno3	0.800			
		kno4	0.783			
		kno5	0.740			
		kno6	0.798			
		kno7	0.722			
		kno8	0.722			
		kno9	0.818			
		kno10	0.719			
		kno11	0.736			
		kno12	0.734			
Export performance	-	performance1	0.837	0.697	0.792	0.000
		performance2	0.928			
		performance3	0.903			

Source: Research findings

Table 3- Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the main research variables

Variables	Cronbach's alpha of the variables
Marketing mix	0.968
Marketing expertise	0.971
Export performance	0.862

Source: Research findings

Following the verification of convergent validity and divergent validity, the research measurement model was deemed valid. Subsequently, after analyzing and confirming the measurement model, the fit of the structural model was evaluated. This evaluation encompassed the examination of the second stage of path analysis, which includes assessing

the coefficient of determination and the model suitability index. Path analysis involves studying relationships between variables in a one-directional flow, represented by distinct paths. The path diagram, as depicted in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, illustrates potential causal links between variables (Bakhtiari and Bakhshandeh, 2019).

Table 4- Convergent validity results of the research

Variable name	Object	Operational burden	Statistics t	Result	AVE
Marketing mix	Product	0.714	2.156	Meaningful	0.624
	Price	0.714	2.156	Meaningful	
	Place	0.882	4.517	Meaningful	
	Promotion	0.835	2.156	Meaningful	
Marketing expertise	kno1	0.854	20.429	Meaningful	0.758
	kno2	0.908	26.703	Meaningful	
	kno3	0.894	19.477	Meaningful	
	kno4	0.883	17.973	Meaningful	
	kno5	0.857	17.744	Meaningful	
	kno6	0.889	19.028	Meaningful	
	kno7	0.846	15.627	Meaningful	
	kno8	0.844	13.259	Meaningful	
	kno9	0.900	20.628	Meaningful	
	kno10	0.845	20.429	Meaningful	
	kno11	0.860	13.903	Meaningful	
	kno12	0.864	14.662	Meaningful	
Export performance	performance1	0.811	8.101	Meaningful	0.791
	performance2	0.936	12.281	Meaningful	
	performance3	0.916	12.541	Meaningful	

Source: Research findings

Table 5- Divergent validity

Variables	1	2	3
Export marketing mix	0.790		
Marketing expertise	0.225	0.781	
Export performance	0.296	0.344	0.889

Source: Research findings

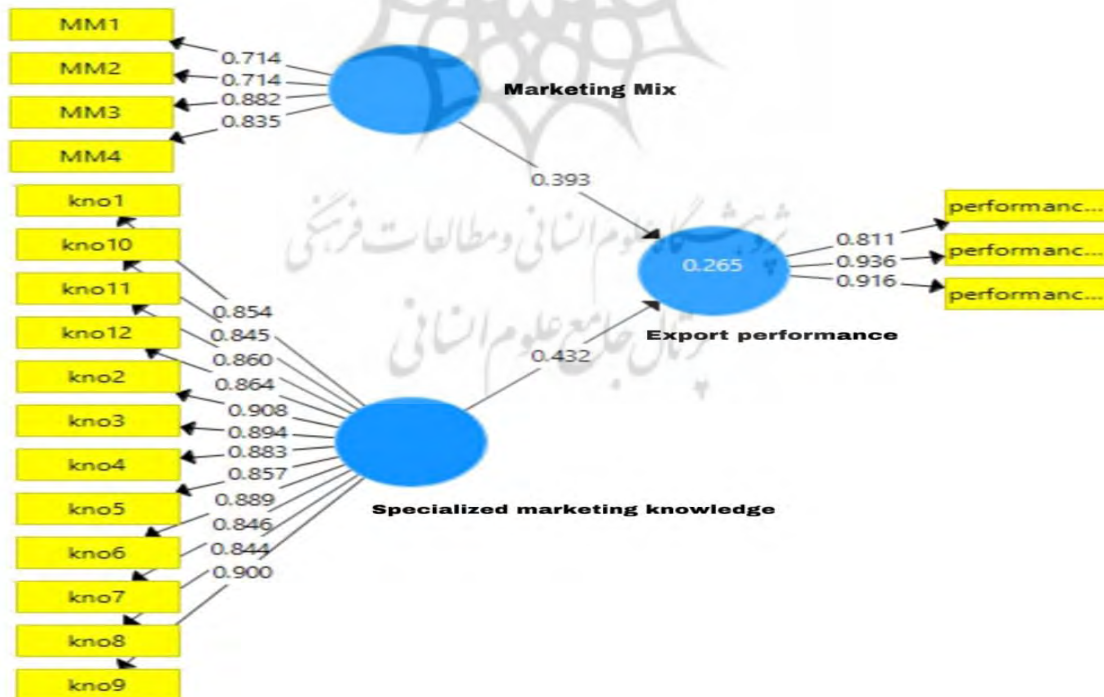


Figure 1- Conceptual model fitted in standard estimation mode

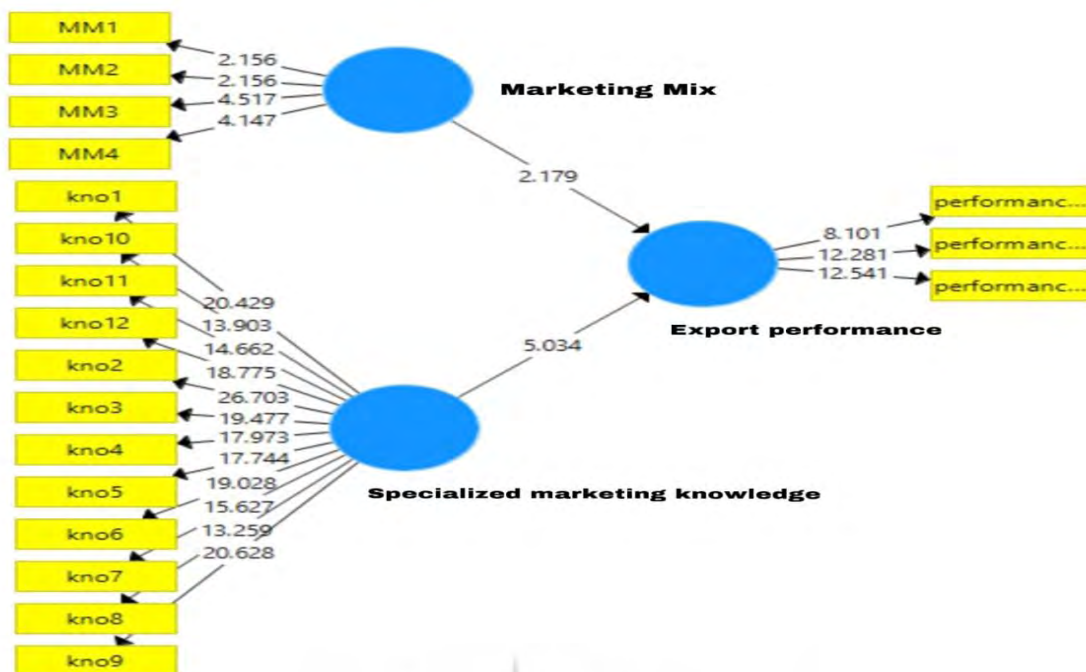


Figure 2- Conceptual model fitted in the significance mode of parameters

Moving forward, this section discusses the research hypotheses and their corresponding tests. To confirm or reject these hypotheses, t-Student's test statistic was utilized. If the t statistic value exceeds ± 1.96 , the hypothesis is confirmed at a significance level of 0.05; otherwise, it is rejected. The first main hypothesis examines whether marketing mix has a positive and significant impact on export performance. The examination of this

relationship among SMEs exporting dried fruit products in Mashhad reveals a coefficient of effect between these two variables equal to 0.393 (as shown in Table 6). The t statistic for this path coefficient is calculated as 2.179, surpassing the critical value of 1.96. Consequently, it can be concluded that this path coefficient is significant at a significance level of 0.05.

Table 6- Regression coefficient and significance of the effect of marketing mix and specialized marketing knowledge on export performance

Hypothesis	Direct route	Regression coefficient	T	Result
1	Export marketing mix → Export performance	0.393	2.179	confirmation
2	Specialized marketing knowledge → Export performance	0.432	5.04	confirmation

Source: Research findings

The second hypothesis states that specialized marketing knowledge has a positive and significant impact on export performance. The study conducted in Mashhad on small and medium-sized dry fruit exporting companies reveals that the coefficient of effect between specialized marketing knowledge and export performance is 0.432, as shown in Table 6. The t statistic value for this path coefficient is 5.04, which exceeds the critical value of 1.96.

Therefore, it can be concluded that this path coefficient is statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance. Furthermore, both the marketing mix hypothesis and the specialized marketing knowledge hypothesis were confirmed at a 95% confidence level for testing research hypotheses.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The purpose of this study was to examine the

impact of marketing mix and specialized marketing knowledge on the export performance of small and medium dry fruit exporting companies in Mashhad, Iran. Two hypotheses were tested regarding export performance. The first hypothesis, which stated that marketing mix components have a positive and significant effect on export performance, was supported by the results. In SMEs, the marketing mix is a collection of tools that aims to generate more profit for the company compared to its competitors by utilizing an innovative approach and combining price, product, promotion, and place. The second hypothesis, which suggested that specialized marketing knowledge has a positive and significant effect on export performance, was also confirmed by the findings. Therefore, sales managers are advised to utilize marketing plans and strategies (specialized marketing knowledge) to increase sales and profitability. These strategies are considered as new tools in the strategic marketing planning process within marketing management. Additionally, managers should thoroughly analyze both the internal and external environment, formulate an appropriate strategy based on internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats, and evaluate its effectiveness accordingly (Sulaimanpur and Valizadeh, 2012).

Based on the findings, the senior managers and marketers of dry fruit exporting companies in Mashhad are advised to take the following actions: Recognizing the importance of the regression coefficient (0.393) indicating the impact of marketing mix on export performance, it is recommended that companies engage marketing and economics

experts to utilize suitable marketing strategies in foreign markets based on target market needs. This can be achieved by enhancing product quality, branding, packaging, competitive pricing, distribution channels, and actively participating in international exhibitions. These efforts will enable companies to secure a favorable market share in their target markets.

The path coefficient for the impact of specialized marketing knowledge on export performance is 0.432, which is consistent with the findings of (Karampour and Ebrahimi, 2014). This study concluded that there is a positive and significant relationship between technical knowledge innovation and export performance. Therefore, it is advisable for senior managers and sales officials to acquire additional training in order to enhance their specialized sales skills and marketing knowledge. This will enable them to utilize up-to-date marketing methods, ultimately leading to increased profits for companies. In the medium term, companies can improve their export performance by implementing strategies such as market segmentation, targeting high-income countries, and penetrating new markets. To sustain exports, it is crucial to understand the attitudes of foreign buyers and engage in advanced marketing activities. These efforts, coupled with government support and uninterrupted export operations, can contribute to the growth of exports across various product categories. Considering that factors like exchange rate fluctuations, epidemic outbreaks (such as COVID-19), political relations, embargoes, etc., have an impact on export performance, future studies should explore these aspects in greater detail.

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مقاله پژوهشی

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اثر آمیخته بازاریابی و دانش تخصصی روی عملکرد صادرات شرکت‌های کوچک و متوسط صادر کننده خشکبار

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چکیده

صادرات محرک حیاتی رشد اقتصادی در کشورهای مختلف است و به طور قابل توجهی به ورود یک کشور به بازارهای جهانی کمک می‌کند و موفقیت اقتصادی را افزایش می‌دهد. در کشورهای در حال توسعه مانند ایران، برنامه‌های توسعه اقتصادی و اجتماعی، گسترش صادرات به ویژه محصولات کشاورزی با ارزش افزوده بالا را در اولویت قرار داده‌اند. رشد صادرات غیرنفتی مانند خشکبار و ورود تولیدکنندگان داخلی به بازارهای جدید جهانی منجر به افزایش تقاضا برای محصولات صادراتی ایران خواهد شد. این امر همچنین منجر به افزایش سطح تولید، افزایش فرصت‌های شغلی و ارزش افزوده بیشتر در فعالیتهای مرتبط می‌شود. برای افزایش عملکرد صادرات، که معیاری حیاتی برای موفقیت یک شرکت در استفاده از منابع و قابلیت‌های خود در عرصه بین‌المللی در یک دوره زمانی خاص است، تمرکز بر بهبود استراتژی‌های بازاریابی و دانش تخصصی بسیار مهم است. بنابراین، این تحقیق با هدف بررسی تاثیر آمیخته بازاریابی و دانش تخصصی بازاریابی بر عملکرد صادرات شرکت‌های کوچک و متوسط فعال در صادرات میوه‌های خشک مشهد در سال ۱۴۰۱ انجام شد. در مجموع ۸۰ پرسشنامه با استفاده از روش نمونه‌گیری در دسترس بین مدیران ارشد، اعضای هیئت مدیره و مدیران بازرگانی SME های میوه خشک توزیع شد. برای تجزیه و تحلیل داده‌ها و آزمون فرضیه‌های تحقیق از مدل‌سازی معادلات ساختاری استفاده گردید. داده‌های آماری و مدل‌سازی معادلات ساختاری نشان داد که تاثیر مشترک آمیخته بازاریابی و دانش بازاریابی تخصصی بر عملکرد صادرات مثبت و معنادار است. برای افزایش سودآوری شرکت، برای مدیران ارشد و مدیران فروش بسیار مهم است که این دو عامل را به رسمیت بشناسند و برای کسب مهارت‌های لازم، آموزش‌های مربوطه را طی کنند. علاوه بر این، مدیران باید از کانال‌های توزیع مناسب برای افزایش صادرات خود استفاده کنند و در عین حال کیفیت و بسته‌بندی محصول را بر اساس ترجیحات خریداران تطبیق دهند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: آمیخته بازاریابی، خشکبار، صادرات، عملکرد صادراتی، معادلات ساختاری

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