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Influence of Managerial and Firm Characteristics on the Internationalization of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Sri Lanka

P.M.M. Zameem^{a*} and T. Bhavan^b

^aMPhil Research Scholar, Faculty of Commerce and Management, Eastern University, Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka Export Development Board

^bDepartment of Economics, Faculty of Commerce and Management, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

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Sri Lanka's Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) find it exporting as a simple way for their internationalization. They contribute less to the value of exports than large companies as they face several challenges that obstruct their export performance during internationalization. These challenges are linked to managerial and firm characteristics. This research attempts to identify the challenging factors that would influence Sri Lanka's SME internationalization. Data for this research were collected from 165 Sri Lanka's SMEs exporting processed food and beverage products through a structured questionnaire. Various techniques were employed to analyze the collected data. The internationalization of SMEs is the dependent variable, measured by export sales performance. Managerial characteristics such as the manager's age, education, international experience, foreign language skills, and entrepreneurial orientation, and firm characteristics such as the firm's age, size, export experience, and ownership are the two independent variables in this study. The findings indicate that SME managers with postgraduate education in Sri Lanka positively influence their export growth during internationalization. However, the entrepreneurial attitudes of SMEs negatively impact their internationalization. Therefore, postgraduate education of SME managers greatly improves the export performance of their respective companies during internationalization, whereas the perceived challenges of the entrepreneurial attitudes of SMEs decline the export performance. Therefore, it is necessary to develop strategies to overcome these challenges in the processed food and beverage industry in order to sustain both SMEs and the economy of Sri Lanka.

*Corresponding zameem@edb.gov.lk

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1. Introduction

Sri Lanka's businesses mostly internationalize through exporting. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Sri Lanka choose exporting as a simple way for their cross border activities. Generally, exporting generates much needed foreign returns for the economic growth of a country. Thus, the SME sector plays a strategically significant role in the Sri Lankan economy as it contributes to more than 75% of the total number of enterprises, 45% of employment, and 52% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Sri Lanka, 2015). Export-potential SMEs and rural enterprises are a growing subject of interest. An appropriate export strategy could provide the corresponding internal framework to enable SMEs and rural enterprises to engage more successfully in external trade and meet international competition. However, Sri Lanka's SMEs contribute only 12% of the total exports as compared to large exporters (Sri Lanka Export Development Board, 2020).

Mostly, a country's economy like Sri Lanka depends on foreign reserves accumulated from exports. Yet, Sri Lanka's GDP has been badly hindered by the pandemic, the Easter attack, and the financial crisis in recent years. This impact reduces profits for entrepreneurs including SMEs, particularly engaged in export oriented industries. However, the rising trade deficit opens the door for growth and motivates SMEs to get involved in the export business. Since 60.8% of SMEs in Sri Lanka engage in manufacturing industry (Gunawardena, 2020), they ought to expand their businesses into global markets for long term survival. However, they face many challenges when their expansion into global markets. As a result, it is important for them to tackle the challenges they face during their efforts in internationalizing global markets in order to improve their export performance and contribute to Sri Lanka's GDP growth. In this research, the challenges are particularly incorporated with demographic factors, represented by managerial characteristics, as well as firm characteristics. Hence, the main objective of this research is to identify the factors affecting the internationalization of Sri Lanka's SMEs in terms of managerial and firm characteristics and propose strategies to encourage their international growth, specifically in the area of exporting. This research specifically focuses on Sri Lanka's processed food and beverage industry, as it comprises many export-oriented firms in the country (National Export Strategy of Sri Lanka, 2018). Therefore, this research provides valuable insights for SME exporters and non-exporters, as well as policymakers and businesses, which could enhance performance of SMEs and influence the macroeconomic environment.

2. Literature Review

Internationalization via Exporting

Internationalization refers to firms engaging in cross-border trade to promote their products and services globally, and it creates business networks and market expansion in foreign markets (Biswas et al., 2017; Fernando and Samarakoon, 2021). In the global context, business networks function via exporting, licensing, joint ventures, franchising, and foreign direct investment. Exporting is considered the simplest beginning point for the process of SMEs' internationalizing their business (Biswas et al., 2017; Madushanka and Sachitra,

2021; Narayanam, 2015). However, SMEs frequently face challenges when exporting caused by demographic factors such as managerial and firm characteristics. These challenges can affect the SMEs' export performance as well as the country's national economy.

Managerial Characteristics

Managerial characteristics refer to demographic factors of a firm's managers. This research chooses the demographic factors such as the manager's age, education, international experience, foreign language skills, and entrepreneurial orientation. Managers are the key instrumental players to facilitate their firms' market expansion globally. They must understand foreign cultures and customers to tap into foreign markets. Madushanka and Sachitra (2021) emphasized in their study that managers' skill-based attributes such as foreign language skill, export market experience, and educational background had an influence to the export success of SMEs. Therefore, a manager's age is important in how they process information, with older managers less cautious and younger ones more innovative, according to Hsu et al. (2013), and they found that a manager's age negatively affects SMEs' internationalization through exporting. Managers with higher levels of education improve their abilities to make decision, manage risks, and navigate across different cultures, which are essential for SMEs entering international markets (Hsu et al., 2013). Thus, SMEs' export performance is positively impacted by managers' higher level of education (Hsu et al., 2013). Managers with prior international experience understand different cultures and global issues, which leads better performance in firms' international expansion efforts, and such experience is vital for improving SMEs' expansion into international markets (Hsu et al., 2013; Oura et al., 2016). Thus, managers' international experience is positively related to SMEs' international expansion (Hsu et al., 2013; Oura et al., 2016). According to Rana and Sorensen (2013), foreign language skills of SME managers help in business negotiations, establishing foreign networks, utilizing the internet, and sharing global information. However, foreign language proficiency has no direct impact on SMEs' internationalization (Rana and Sorensen, 2013). Rua et al. (2017) and Osei-Bonsu (2020) found that the entrepreneurial orientation of senior executives or managers plays an important influence in boosting the capability of the SMEs to be competitive, innovative, and risk-taking, which empower the SMEs to be more proactive toward international business activities. In their study, Fernando and Samarakoon (2021) emphasized that SMEs' lack of entrepreneurial abilities prevent them from expanding into foreign markets.

Firm Characteristics

Firm characteristics refer to the demographic factors of a firm, which play a crucial role in a firm's ability to identify suitable export opportunities and achieve success in its international endeavors. This research investigates the impact of SMEs' age, size, export experience, and ownership on their export performance during internationalization. Older firms usually have more internationalization prospects due to their increased resources and knowledge (Mupemhi et al., 2013). However, there is a negative relationship between the age of an SME and its level of international expansion, according to Pena-Vinces et al. (2016). The size of an SME is an important factor in determining its competitiveness in international markets, according to Mupemhi et al.

(2013), who found no relationship between the size of an SME and its internationalization, implying that larger companies possess more resources and capabilities to achieve economies of scale. According to Dhilwayo (2016), an SME's export performance is greatly influenced by its experience in exporting, with older companies performing better in international market. This experience influences sales and profits, improving the export effectiveness of SMEs. Further, tax advantages and incentives for international recognition encourage SMEs operating as limited companies in Sri Lanka in engage in international business.

3. Research Methodology

The study population consisted of 1,736 SMEs from diverse industries registered with the Sri Lanka Export Development Board as of 2022. Out of these, the target population of the study was 490 SMEs engaged in the processed food and beverage industry in Sri Lanka, of which 165 SMEs engaged in exports during the period 2019 to 2021 were participated the study as shown in Table 1. This research used a structured questionnaire and purposive sampling method to collect data. As shown in Table 1, SMEs in seven districts namely Ampara, Batticaloa, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu, Pollannaruwa and Trincomalee did not engage in exports during the period from 2019 to 2021.

Table 1: Sampling Frame of the Study

No.	District	Target Population	Sample	Percentage (%)
1	Ampara	12	-	-
2	Anuradhapura	10	2	1
3	Badulla	8	3	2
4	Batticaloa	11	-	-
5	Colombo	30	15	9
6	Galle	30	8	5
7	Gampaha	18	8	5
8	Hambantota	8	3	2
9	Jaffna	56	15	9
10	Kalutara	20	10	6
11	Kandy	70	30	18
12	Kegalle	15	3	2
13	Kilinochchi	4	-	-
14	Kurunegala	80	34	21
15	Mannar	4	-	-
16	Matale	15	6	4
17	Matara	20	7	4
18	Monaragala	6	4	2
19	Mullaitivu	5	-	-
20	Nuwara Eliya	20	6	4
21	Pollannaruwa	5	-	-
22	Puttalam	10	4	2
23	Ratnapura	15	5	3
24	Trincomalee	10	-	-
25	Vavuniya	8	2	1
	Total	490	165	100

Source: Survey Data

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study. The main research construct of this study is SMEs’ internationalization (the dependent variable) measured by export performance (quantitatively), which includes four indicators: export sales performance, total sales performance, export profitability, and exports as a percentage of production. It was impacted by two independent variables such as managerial characteristics and firm characteristics. Managerial characteristics consist of five indicators, which are manager’s age, education level, international experience, foreign language skills, and entrepreneurial orientation. Firm characteristics consist of four indicators, which are firm’s age, size, export experience, and business ownership.

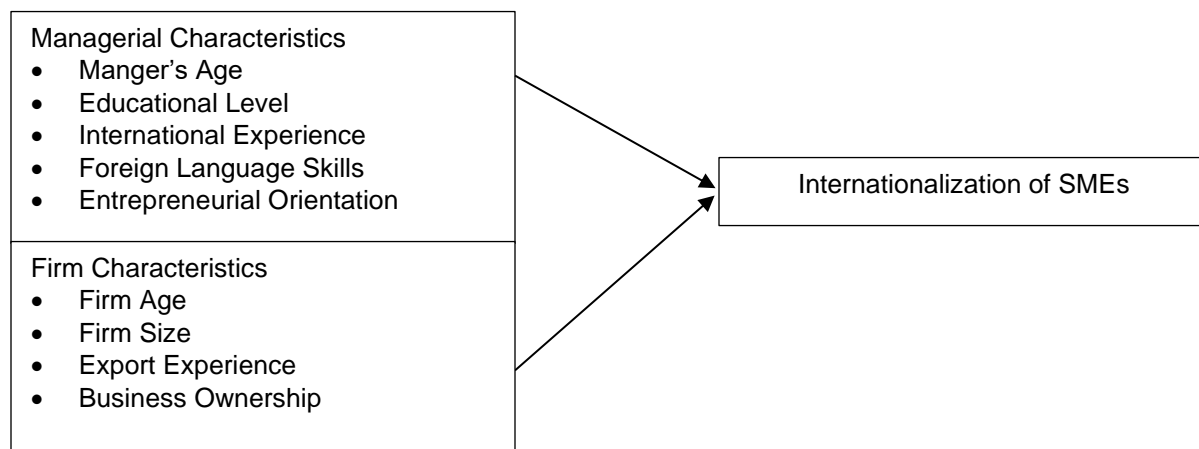


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Constructed based on the model adapted from Lakew (2015)

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was used to reduce the above four indicators of export performance. For this purpose, principal component analysis with orthogonal varimax rotation was applied to reduce the indicators of export performance into a small and meaningful factor with support of Stata statistical package. In section 4.3, the findings of factor analysis are explored.

Econometric Model

This research employed the econometric model presented below to examine the influence of managerial and firm characteristics on export performance during the internationalization process of SMEs in Sri Lanka.

$$\ln Y_i = \beta_0 + \sum_{h=1}^m \beta_1 A_{ih} + \sum_{j=1}^n \beta_2 B_{ij} + \epsilon_i \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

Where, $\ln Y_i$ denotes SMEs’ internationalization (export performance) ($i = \text{firm } 1 \text{ to } 165$), A_{ih} indicates the vector of managerial characteristics, B_{ij} indicates the vector of firm characteristics, and ϵ_i indicates error term.

Measurements

All independent variables were measured in the questionnaire using nominal scales, except entrepreneurial orientation which was measured using a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Its decision rule assumes that $H_0: \mu \leq 3$ (relating to the medium point in the scale); all attributes of entrepreneurial orientation considered by respondents are not significantly perceived challenges for SMEs' internationalization in Sri Lanka, where $i =$ attributes of entrepreneurial orientation from 1 to 14 as described in Table 3.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Managerial Characteristics

Table 2 illustrates the descriptive findings for managerial characteristics, which include age, educational level, international experience, and foreign language skills of 165 respondents participated in this study.

Table 2: Descriptive Findings for Managerial Characteristics

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 31 years	26	15.76
	31 - 40 years	43	26.06
	41 – 50 years	43	26.06
	51 – 60 years	37	22.42
	Above 60 years	16	9.70
Education	Secondary O/L & A/L	58	35.15
	Diploma, Higher diploma etc.	49	29.70
	Graduated	42	25.45
	Post-graduated	16	9.70
International experience	Yes	72	43.64
	No	93	56.36
Foreign language skills	None	13	7.88
	Poor	17	10.30
	Moderate	48	29.09
	Good	62	37.58
	Excellent	25	15.15

Source: Survey Data

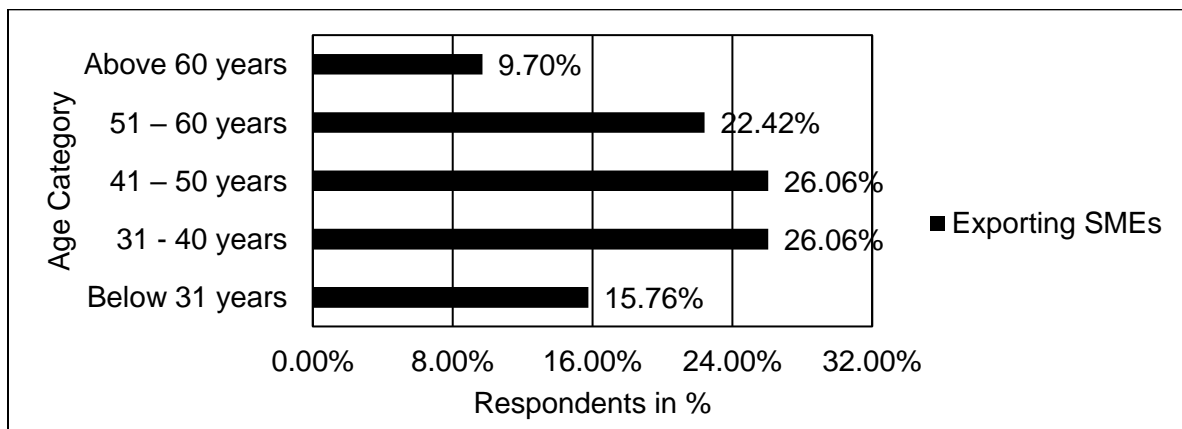


Figure 2: Age Category of the Respondents

Source: Survey Data

Figure 2 illustrates the age category of the respondents, indicating that there were an equal representation (26.06%) from both age categories, 31-41 and 41-50 in the study. Also, there were 22.42% of them from the age category of 51-60. 15.76% of them were from the age category below 31, while only 9.70% were above 60.

Figure 3 illustrates the educational background of the respondents, indicating that the majority (35.15%) had secondary education (ordinary level and advanced level). Also, there were 29.70% of them having with diplomas and higher diplomas. 25.45% of them were with degrees, while only 9.70% with postgraduate degrees.

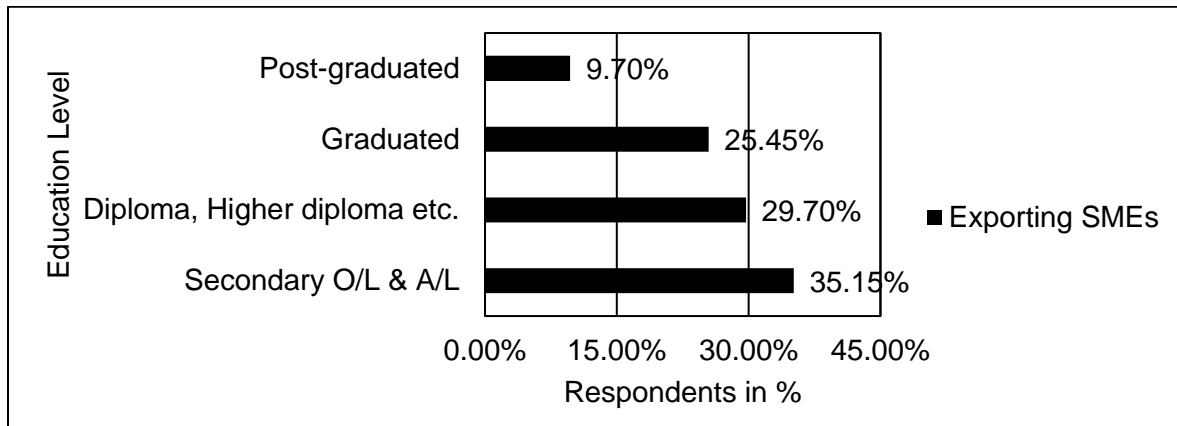


Figure 3: Educational Background of the Respondents

Source: Survey Data

Figure 4 illustrates the respondents' overseas experience, indicating that 43.64% of them were overseas before joining or establishing their existing business firm.

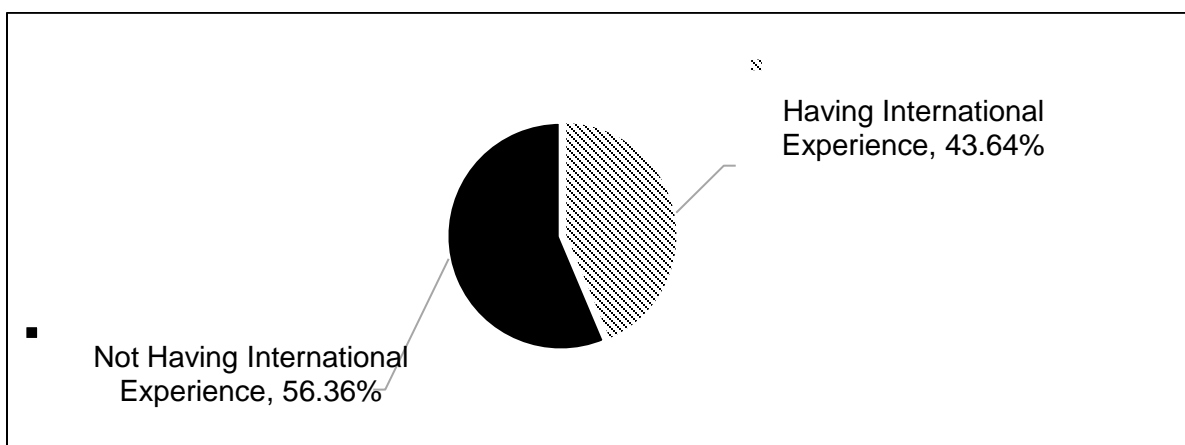


Figure 4: International Experience of the Respondents

Source: Survey Data

Figure 5 illustrates the respondents' foreign language skills, indicating that more than half of the respondents (52.73%) in the study possess English speaking skills above a moderate level as a foreign language, while 29.09% have skills at a moderate level.

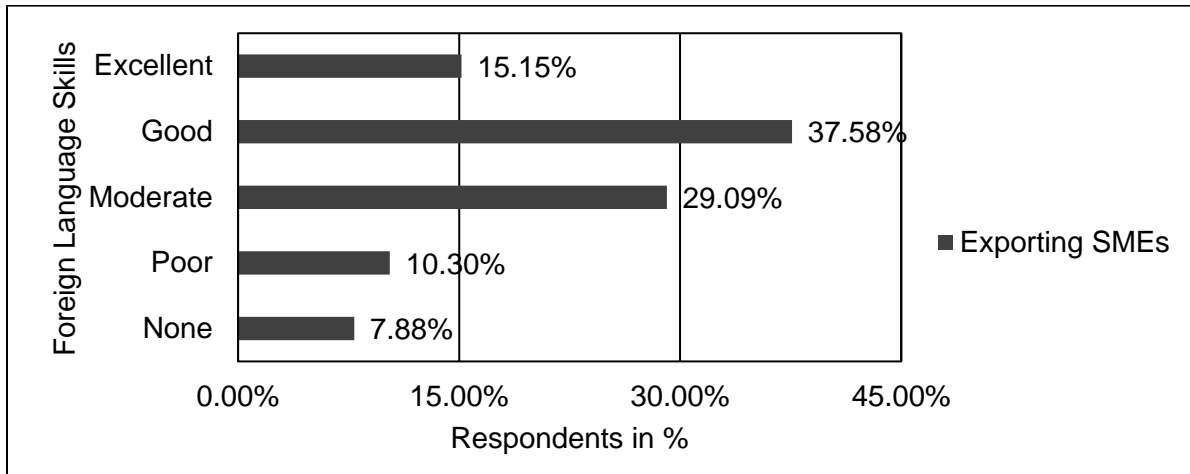


Figure 4: Foreign Language Skills of the Respondents

Source: Survey Data

Table 3 presents SMEs' entrepreneurial perceptions, showing that all entrepreneurial attributes are seen as significant challenges to the international expansion of Sri Lankan SMEs (mean values > 3.0 and p values > 0.05). The first four entrepreneurial attributes for SME entrepreneurs listed in Table 3 include 'having extensive experience of foreign cultures', 'showing interest in learning about foreign competitors', 'being eager to learn about foreign markets', and 'attending export market seminars and trade fairs', which are seen as major hurdles in the international expansion of Sri Lankan SMEs due their mean values exceeding 4. Therefore, it is important to encourage Sri Lankan SMEs that export processed food and beverages to improve their skills in overcoming these hurdles to succeed in international markets.

Table 3: SMEs' Entrepreneurial Perceptions on the Internationalization

Attributes of Entrepreneurial Orientation	Mean	t	p*
The leader has extensive experience of foreign cultures	4.479	31.10	0.000
Seek to learn about foreign competitors	4.424	27.55	0.000
Eager to learn about foreign markets	4.370	24.81	0.000
Attend export market seminars and trade fairs	4.291	26.54	0.000
Encourages language learning by key staffs within the firm	4.036	11.77	0.000
The leader undertakes foreign visits for business	3.885	11.27	0.000
Encourage foreign visits for key staffs within the firms	3.764	9.168	0.000
Opportunities are greater than the risks	3.570	7.02	0.000
Take a very competitive oriented approach	3.564	7.18	0.000
Cooperate in any international and/or national networks for internationalization	3.491	6.52	0.000

Accept temporary losses for long-term market share	3.473	5.79	0.000
Operate in at least one formal network, which help us in the internationalization process	3.303	4.74	0.000
Operate in at least one informal network, which help us in the internationalization process	3.297	4.57	0.000
Encourages foreign visitors to the enterprise	3.115	1.887	0.031

Source: Survey Data

Note: * indicate the level of significant at 5%

Firm Characteristics

Table 4 illustrates the descriptive findings for firm characteristics, which include age, size, exporting experience and ownership of 165 SMEs participated in this study.

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Firm age	Below 6 years	17	10.30
	6 – 10 years	64	38.79
	11 - 15 years	43	26.06
	Above 15 years	41	24.85
Firm size	Below 11 employees	94	56.97
	11 – 50 employees	58	35.15
	Above 51 employees	13	7.88
Exporting experience level	Below 6 years	93	56.36
	6 - 10 years	50	30.30
	Above 10 years	22	13.33
Company ownership	Sole proprietorship	76	46.06
	Partnership	19	11.52
	Limited company	70	42.42

Table 4: Descriptive Findings for Firm Characteristics

Source: Survey Data

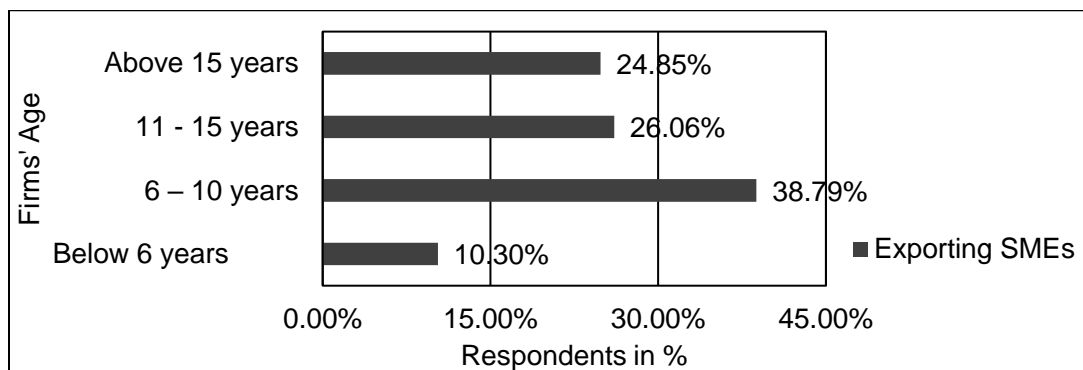


Figure 6: The Age Levels of Firms

Source: Survey Data

Figure 6 illustrates the age levels of the firms participated in the study. It indicates that around 90% of firms were in their business for 6 years and above, while only 10.3% of them were below 6 years.

Figure 7 illustrates the size of firms (employees' capacity) participated in the study. In terms of employees' capacity at firms, 56.97% of firms had below 11 workers. 35.15% of firms employed 11 to 50 workers, and the remaining 7.88% had above 50 employees.

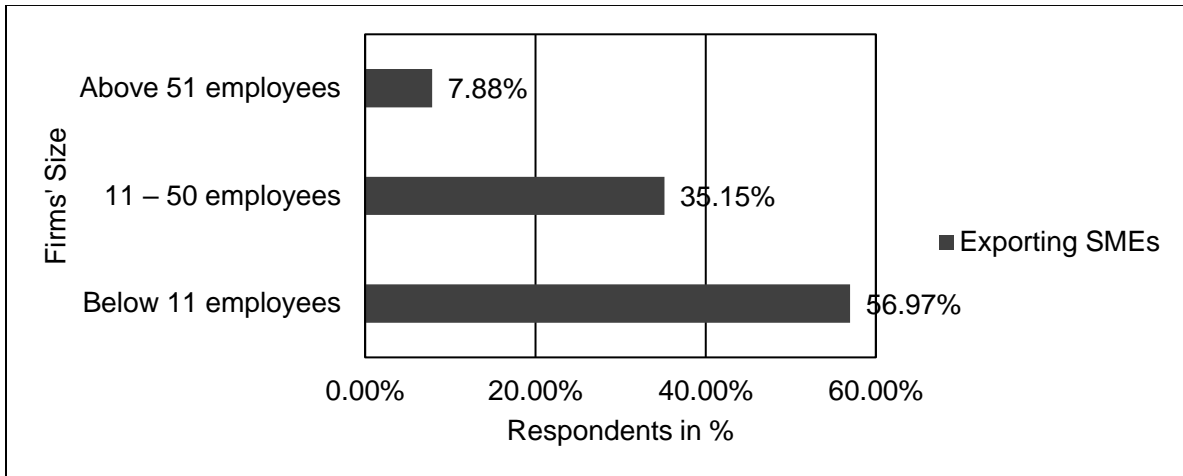


Figure 7: The Size of Firms (Employees' Capacity)

Source: Survey Data

Figure 8 illustrates the export experience of the firms participated in the study. It indicates that 56.36% of firms involved in the study had below 6 years of experience, while the remaining 43.63% had 6 years and above.

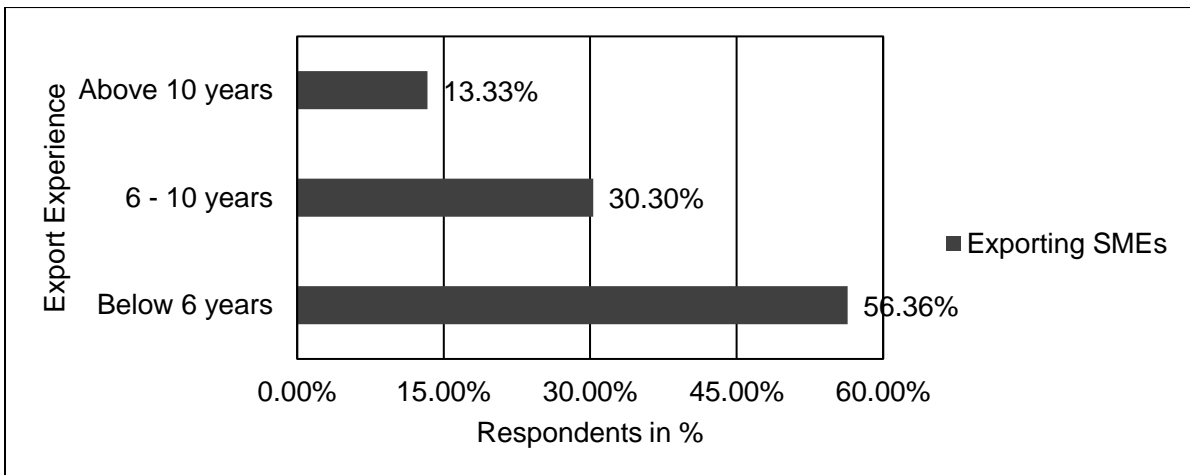


Figure 8: Export Experience of Firms

Source: Survey Data

Figure 9 illustrates the ownership of the firms participated in the study. It indicates that 46.06% of firms had sole proprietorships. 42.42% of the firms had limited companies, while 11.52% of them had partnerships.

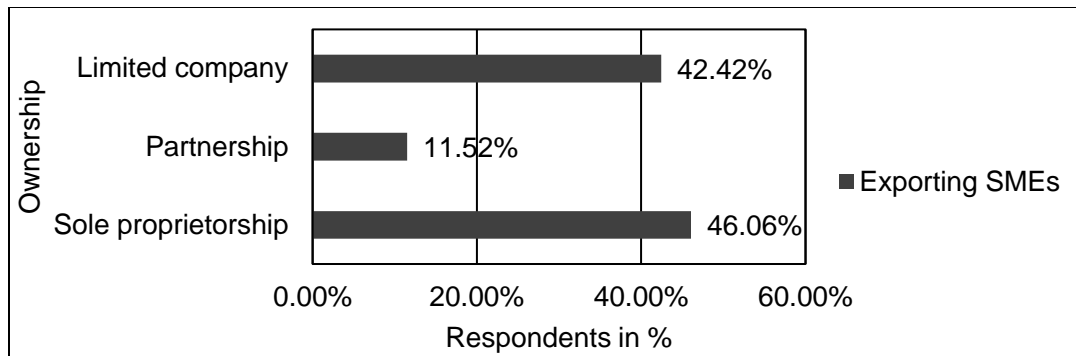


Figure 9: Ownership of Firms

Source: Survey Data

Factor Analysis

Table 5 shows the results of the factor analysis used to reduce the four indicators of export performance, such as export sales performance (factor 1), total sales performance (factor 2), export profitability (factor 3), and exports as a percentage of production (factor 4). Accordingly, factor 1 explains 76% of the total variance, and its factor score is used as the dependent variable (export sales performance) in the subsequent analysis of the econometric model for the internationalization of SMEs.

Table 5: Factor Analysis of Export Performance Indicators

Factor	Eigen value	Variance %	Cumulative %	Extracted factor		
				Eigen value	Variance %	Cumulative %
1	3.040	76.00	76.00	3.040	76.00	76.00
2	0.946	23.65	99.65	-	-	-
3	0.010	00.27	99.92	-	-	-
4	0.003	00.08	100.00	-	-	-

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy 0.715
 Bartlett test of sphericity
 Approximate Chi-square 1494.193, Degrees of freedom 6, Sig. 0.000
 Extraction method: Principal component factors

Source: Stata Output

Econometric Model for SMEs' Internationalization

Table 6 shows the results of the econometric model, which indicates that only two variables of managerial characteristics, respondents' post graduate education and entrepreneurial orientation are found to have a significant impact on the internationalization of SME in Sri Lanka at 5% and 10% significant levels, respectively. However, the firm characteristics are not found to have a significant effect on the internationalization of SME in Sri Lanka.

The R^2 value of the model is as 0.197, and it implies that 19.7% of the internationalization of SMEs in Sri Lanka can be explained by managerial characteristics and firm characteristics in the study. There is no multicollinearity issue detected in the model presented in Table 6 since the values of VIF and tolerance for

managerial characteristics and firm characteristics fall within the acceptance range (VIF = 1–10, tolerance = 0.1–1.0), and the model was also significant at the 5% level.

Table 6: Impact of Managerial and Firm Characteristics on SMEs' Internationalization

Variables	Coef.	S.E.	t	p	VIF	Tolerance
(Constant)	3.874***	.510	7.60	0.000	-	-
Manager's age						
31–40 years	0.200	.207	0.97	0.335	2.64	0.378
41–50 years	0.068	.213	0.32	0.752	2.81	0.356
51–60 years	-0.169	.236	-0.72	0.476	3.11	0.322
Above 60 years	0.133	.291	0.46	0.649	2.37	0.423
Education level						
Diploma holders	0.126	.159	0.79	0.431	1.70	0.589
Graduated	-0.070	.175	-0.40	0.691	1.86	0.537
Post graduated	0.594*	.257	2.31	0.022	1.85	0.541
Overseas experience						
No	-0.187	.143	-1.31	0.191	1.60	0.625
Foreign language skills						
Poor	-0.008	.285	-0.03	0.977	2.41	0.416
Moderate	-0.106	.264	-0.40	0.689	4.61	0.217
Good	-0.133	.273	-0.49	0.626	5.60	0.178
Excellent	-0.543	.323	-1.68	0.095	4.30	0.232
Entrepreneurial orientation	-0.334**	.127	-2.64	0.009	1.67	0.598
Firm age						
6–10 years	-0.014	.218	-0.06	0.950	3.60	0.278
11–15 years	0.017	.246	0.07	0.946	3.73	0.268
Above 15 years	-0.036	.277	-0.13	0.897	4.58	0.218
Firm size						
11–50 employees	0.066	.154	0.43	0.671	1.74	0.576
51–300 employees	0.444	.248	1.79	0.076	1.43	0.700
Ownership						
Partnership	-0.007	.199	-0.04	0.971	1.29	0.775
Limited	-0.223	.135	-1.65	0.101	1.42	0.705
Observations = 165, F (20, 144) = 1.7647, p-value = 0.0299, R-sq. = 0.1969						
Dependent Variable: REGR factor score of SMEs' internationalization (export sales performance)						

Source: Stata Output

Note: *, **, and *** indicate the level of significant at 5%, 10%, and 1%, respectively

The model in Table 6 shows that the positive coefficient for postgraduate education is 0.594. This indicates that a 1% increase in postgraduate education of respondents leads to a 0.6% growth in their internationalization compared to respondents with secondary education at a 5% significant level. This means that respondents with postgraduate education in the model positively impact their firm's internationalization compared to those with secondary education. This finding aligns with Hsu et al. (2013), who highlighted that managers with higher education levels enhance their abilities to make decisions, manage risks, and navigate across different cultures. These abilities are essential for SMEs venturing their products and services into global markets. Therefore, postgraduate educational background among managers is statistically significant in driving the expansion of Sri Lankan SMEs in the global markets via exports.

The model in Table 6 shows that the negative coefficient for entrepreneurial orientations is 0.334. This implies that a 1% increase in the entrepreneurial orientation of SMEs leads to a 0.3% decrease in their internationalization at a significant level of 10%. This means that the entrepreneurial orientation of SMEs engaged in this study negatively impacts their growth during internationalization. This result does not match the result of Rua et al. (2017) and Osei-Bonsu (2020), who revealed that entrepreneurial orientation positively impacts the export performance of firms when venturing into international markets. As a result, SMEs' capacity would boost to recognize and take advantage of opportunities.

The level of education significantly shapes an individual's skills, knowledge, cognitive styles, values, and understanding (Hsu et al., 2013). Thus, managers with advanced degrees exhibit superior knowledge and a greater capacity for evaluating opportunities, alongside a willingness to embrace risk and uncertainty. As SMEs embark on internationalization, understanding each country's unique cultural and organizational frameworks becomes essential. This knowledge empowers higher educated managers to make informed decisions and enhances their information processing abilities, which are crucial for international business operations. In this study, about 10% of SME managers hold a master's degree, which is positively impacting the Sri Lankan economy by facilitating SME exports. Therefore, higher education is essential for Sri Lankan SMEs to grow their businesses in global markets.

On the other hand, the SMEs involved in this study shared their views on the 14 international entrepreneurial attitudes analyzed as challenges to their internationalization. As this research mainly centers on SMEs, the management's attitudes and behaviors in these companies could greatly influence their operations. A notable portion of the SMEs involved in this research are family-operated businesses, in which the owners hold managerial roles and have complete decision-making power regarding their firms. Consequently, family-run SMEs entirely overlook the risk elements associated with proper governance and the improvement of the entrepreneurial culture within the organizations. As a result, within family-owned SMEs, especially in this study, the findings related to entrepreneurship attitudes and the growth of export performance during internationalization are contradictory. Therefore, it is vital to adopt strategies concerning entrepreneurial skills such as global networking, marketing capabilities, innovation and risk management expertise, international learning, and cross-border experience to foster entrepreneurial mindsets in Sri Lankan SMEs. These business tactics accelerate the internationalization of SMEs, which result in enhanced export performance.

5. Conclusion

This study was carried out to determine the influence of managerial and firm characteristics on the internationalization of exporting SMEs in the processed food and beverage industry in Sri Lanka. The internationalization of SMEs measured by export sales performance was the dependent variable in this study. Managerial characteristics and firm characteristics were two independent variables. Manager's age, education, international experience, language skills, and entrepreneurial orientation were considered for the managerial characteristics. Firm's age, size, export experience, and ownership were considered for the firm

characteristics. The multiple regression analysis was constructed to evaluate the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable.

The overall results suggest that respondents with postgraduate education positively influence the internationalization of their SMEs in the processed food and beverage industry in Sri Lanka. However, the entrepreneurial attributes of SMEs negatively influence their internationalization. Hence, SME companies in Sri Lanka that have executives or managers with postgraduate education levels are likely to have increased opportunities for enhancing their firms' export performance during the internationalization process. Yet, these performances may be obstructed if SMEs encounter more perceived challenges in their international entrepreneurial attitudes. Therefore, it is necessary to develop strategies to overcome these challenges in the processed food and beverage industry in order to sustain both SMEs and the economy of Sri Lanka.

Since entrepreneurial orientation is important for the long term sustainability of SMEs, the subsequent strategies are recommended to overcome the challenges related to the the entrepreneurial attitudes of SMEs to enhance their positive performance in exports during the internationalization efforts.

SMEs should provide the opportunity to pursue further education and professional development programmes to enhance their key staff knowledge and skills in international business practices.

Build extensive social and professional networks within the international business community. This can be achieved through participation in industry events, trade fairs, conferences and networking platforms.

SMEs should establish partnerships with universities and educational institutions to develop programmes to focus on international business and entrepreneurship. These partnerships can provide their managers or individual employees with access to specialized knowledge and resources.

SME managers or individual staff should have the opportunity to pair with experienced mentors who have a strong background in international business. This mentorship can offer valuable insights, guidance, and support throughout the internationalization process.

Provide training programmes and workshops to enhance the knowledge and skills of SMEs or key employees in attending export market seminars and trade fairs to learn about foreign cultures, markets, and competitors. Encourage SMEs to actively participate in industry events, trade associations, and business networks to foster connections and gain exposure to international markets.

Establish partnerships or collaborations with organizations or individuals who have experience in international markets. This can provide access to valuable networks, resources, and guidance, helping SMEs navigate the complexities of global trade and facilitate to access to marketing information and resources in relation to specific data sources and valuable market insights.

Competing internet : The authors declare no competing interest.

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