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Exploring Exporting Firms' Adaptability and Competitiveness Configurations in Relation to Export Customer Satisfaction in COVID-19 Times

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the dynamic capabilities of exporters during the pandemic, specifically on export adaptability – since it is core to responding to and enduring the pandemic's turmoil. COVID-19 manifested sudden enduring uncertainty with severe implications for international operations, disrupting global value-chains and impacting world trade with devastating effect – crucially requiring exporting firms to swiftly adapt to cope and surmount havoc. The objectives of the research are twofold: to explore the combined impact of firms' export adaptability dynamic capabilities, together with specific exporter characteristics, on export customer satisfaction in COVID-19 times; to analyse the moderating effect of the firms' competitive advantage on this relationship. Our study investigates agri-food exporting companies in Chile, an export-oriented country in this sector. We adopt a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) methodology. This approach offers ideal causality identification, as it is based on the premise that outcomes of interest usually have multiple interdependent causes. We conclude that the presence of exporting firms' adaptability capability, together with characteristics typically inherent in being a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME), and a permanent exporter, significantly favour export customer satisfaction, and that having a strong competitive advantage intensifies this relationship.

Keywords: *Dynamic exporting capabilities, Adaptability, Export Customer Satisfaction, Competitive Advantage, fsQCA, Agribusiness*

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1 INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the dynamic capability (DC) of exporters during the pandemic, specifically on export adaptability – since it is core to responding to, and enduring the pandemic's turmoil. In highly volatile environments, adaptation dynamic capabilities are "pivotal for organizational transformation" when subjected to radical external turbulence – from its basis, reconfiguration and innovation support "the creation of completely new capabilities via exploration … experimentation and risk taking" (Dixon et al., 2014, p. 186). Creative adaptability is fundamental to coping with and surviving unexpected crises, uncertainty and disasters, whether at individual (Orkibi, 2021) or organisational levels (Chong, 2014).

We adopt Efrat et al.'s (2018, p. 116) notion of export adaptability "defined as enabling firms to seize opportunities and reconfigure their resource-base to adapt quickly to competitor actions and external threats" – incorporating "the macro-environment - that includes new market opportunities, competitor threats and changing customer needs ... beyond the control of managers, who therefore need to be able to adapt quickly. [...] The ability to react timely to environmental changes" (see also Dibrell et al., 2007; Jayachandran et al., 2004; Lyus et al.,

2011; Morgan et al., 2003; Nemkova et al., 2015; Sousa et al., 2010). We posit exporting SMEs' crucial need for such adaptive capability is critically heightened in disruptive COVID-19 times. In this discontinuous and surprising context, the aim of our research is to explore the nature and extent of exporting Chilean firms' adaptability and competitiveness facing-up to COVID-19; and attendant implications on their export customers' satisfaction – as they sought to revive and maintain international operations amid successive global lockdowns, unforeseen disruptions and persistent uncertainty. We consider 'customer satisfaction', as it consolidates various aspects of the exporting firm's offering in the foreign market and is central to driving further sales and international growth – performance. "[C]ustomer satisfaction has been and remains one of the most widely adopted and analyzed business metrics – and quite possibly, the single most widely adopted such metric – within the international business ecosystem" (Hult et al., 2022, p. 1695; see also Mintz et al., 2019; and Hult et al. 2020). In this regard, empirical research has stressed the importance of considering the configurational effect of dynamic capabilities in relation to competitive performance, especially in the case of managers operating in resource-constrained circumstances and turbulent environments (e.g., Li & Liu, 2014).

However, in their recent, extensive and detailed review of customer satisfaction research in international business, Hult et al. (2022, p. 1698) recognize that "largely the examination of strategic drivers [of export customer satisfaction] has been overlooked." Amid this evident dearth, isolated instances explicitly consider, e.g., CSR, channel strategy, and segmentation strategy – all more specific, product-related and or direct associated drivers of customer satisfaction – rather than broad strategic firm-level attributes such as holistic capability or competitive advantage. Indeed, extant research has "largely neglected the examination of firm-level strategic drivers of customer satisfaction and its objective firm performance implications in the international context" (Hult et al., 2022, p. 1705). From a different perspective, and aligned with our research context, B2B studies examining importer-exporter associations with respect to customer satisfaction have invariably focused on the role of national culture and direct moderators (Hult et al., 2022, p. 1709). Our study contributes to this marked gap by offering insights consolidating the implications of firm-level adaptability capabilities and competitive advantage dynamics on export customer satisfaction. We argue that combinations of multiple factors related to the firm's internal dynamic capabilities and externally directed competitive advantages (CA) lead to enhanced export performance. Surprisingly, in spite of efforts considering both determinants' individual direct effect interacting together, such as in Efrat et al. (2018), we believe that such combinations have not yet been adequately researched. To address this, we perform a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) on a sample of 37 Chilean exporting agri-food firms. The fsQCA method treats cases as configurations, that is, as combinations of attributes (Fiss, 2007). We believe this approach offers better causality identification as it is based on the premise that outcomes of interest usually have multiple interdependent causes (Greckhamer et al., 2008).

Particularly hard-hit by the pandemic (IMF, 2021a; ECLAC, 2020; *The Economist*, 2021a, 2021b), South America furthermore exhibits negative prospects for enduring recessionary effects (IMF 2021b; OECD, 2020a) – accentuating firms' need to adapt, respond and enhance international market competitiveness in COVID-19 times. Aligned with the focus of our research, Chile ranks among the world's top agricultural exporters; such activity is strategically important for the region (Espitia et al., 2022; OECD, 2020b; Vendrell-Herrero et al., 2017). Its network of economic-trade agreements has the greatest access to world GDP according to the OECD (SUBREI, 2023); and Chilean food and agriculture exports are significant, representing the country's main 'non-copper' industry export, with around 970 different products shipped to over 170 destinations (ProChile, 2023). Essentially, the nature of this sector innately requires

dynamic adaptability even in normal times. Externalities such as weather and climate present shifting variables directly affecting yield, output and volatile prices. Similarly, in the export of agri-food products, sensitivity to logistics and supply-chain disruptions result in waste and lost value due to restrictive shelf-life and stocking limitations – impacting competitiveness, return and performance. Our paper next provides the theoretical background supporting our research, and presents our hypotheses. Following, we articulate our methodological approach and present our data. We then discuss and consolidate our results. Finally, we conclude with our ensuing findings, articulating implications for export managers as well as policy support, and suggest areas for further research.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Adaptability capability and export customer satisfaction

Organisational agility may not always be universally required, as it presents a cost / efficiency trade-off in stable or less dynamic environments (Teece et al., 2016). However, the "international business environment is dynamic and unpredictable, and organizations that operate on the international scene have to be proactive in order to remain competitive and succeed" (Efrat et al., 2018, p. 114) – more so in uncertain COVID-19 times (Patrucco & Kahkonen, 2021), and particularly for agribusinesses and food supply chains (Richards & Rickard, 2020; Aday & Aday, 2020). If CA is externally oriented, discerning among firms' value offering to export customers and the cost of delivering that realised value in international markets (Morgan et al., 2004, p. 91), then complementarily, internally originating-DCs are the "ability of an organization to perform a coordinated set of tasks, utilizing organizational resources, for the purpose of achieving a particular end result" (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003, p. 999), denoting adaptability. Such "responsiveness of a firm's resource stock to increasingly turbulent environments is associated with competitive advantage, dynamic capabilities are of inherent strategic relevance to a firm" (Vogel & Güttel 2013, p. 426; see also Teece, 2013).

Scholars further underline the strategic and operational importance of such adaptive DCs especially in the context of internationalisation and export activity – driving explorative as well as exploitative initiatives (Efrat et al., 2018; Prange & Verdier, 2011). "Export adaptability is the firm's ability to align with its foreign environment and is key [to] firms' export performance" (Efrat et al., 2018, p. 116; citing Morgan et al., 2003). This includes responding to: new market opportunities, shifting customer needs, competitor threats, and various other changing macro dynamics. Empirical research in non-pandemic times indicates foreign "market adaptation is positively associated with performance in foreign markets" (Ciszwska-Mlinaric 2019, p. 1). Especially among SMEs, adaptation is often driven by international experience (mitigating liabilities of smallness), effectively improving performance in export operations (Hollender et al., 2017). While firms' 'normal' established adaptation capabilities are required for competitive performance, unprecedented pandemic disruption would furthermore require exporting firms to engage in trial and error mitigation measures to address and respond to such novel crisis (Teece, 2016; Patrucco & Kähkönen, 2021). Indeed, firms' tendency to generally 'under-adapt' to international host-market requirements (compromising export- and profit-maximisation) (Dow, 2006), would likely be accentuated in dynamic crisis situations, becoming more critical to CA (Li & Liu, 2014) and detrimental to survival (Patrucco & Kähkönen, 2021). Strategic adaptability, as distinguished from operational agility (which entails responding quickly within the boundaries of an existing business model), entails rethinking organisational strategy as well as redesigning and reconfiguring in response to turbulence and unexpected events impinging on an unpredictable future, presenting adaptability as a foremost strategic capability during crisis. Facing deep uncertainty emanating from unknown-unknowns,

managers need to entrepreneurially steer their exporting organisations to creatively adapt in circumstances favouring experimentation and *in situ* learning – evolving, responsive and mitigating adjustment, rather than elaborate planning (Teece et al., 2016; Orkibi, 2021). Within this context, adaptation is also directed at international clients' similarly crisis-stricken, yet possibly different circumstances and customer needs.

In the context of our study, research empirically observes strong DC significance for competitiveness among agribusiness producers typically located in developing regions (e.g., Purnomo, 2018). Here, human interrelation dynamics and managerial and enterprising capabilities were also found to be of particular importance due to their strong connection with the sector (Ibeh, 2005; Lamprinopoulou et al., 2006) – especially in the case of exporters (Sachitra & Chong, 2017; Ibeh, 2005; Yercan & Isikli, 2007; see also Teece, 2018). In developing countries, responsive capability recognising and seizing opportunities for international entrepreneurship is particularly important in globally competitive markets (Kiss et al., 2012). This is also broadly noted in South America (Geldres-Weiss et al., 2021): in Brazil (Junior et al., 2020), as well as with Chilean fruit-growing exporters (Geldres-Weiss et al., 2021; Murray, 1997). For example, researching the importance of adaptation of internal resources for the internationalisation of Brazilian agri-food businesses, Pigatto et al. (2019) observed that human and organisational resource elements, which necessitate greater abilities of adaptation, enabled the firms to realise sustainable competitive advantages. Indeed, such characteristics were directly and empirically evinced as critically important among South American agribusinesses facing up to COVID-19 (Geldres-Weiss et al., 2021).

Drawing together theoretical strands informing the basis for our study, it is evident that especially in COVID-19 times, interrelationships between the extent of exporting firms' adaptability capabilities, organisational characteristics, and prior international exposure, stand to have a marked effect on their international performance and prospects for survival amid unforeseen turmoil. As indicated, we converge our focus onto customer satisfaction, as it consolidates various aspects of the exporting firm's offering in the foreign market, and is key for international sales growth and expansion. Notwithstanding, the strategic firm-level aspects with which our study contends do not seem to have been considered jointly.

By way of illustration, besides the aforementioned research contending with, e.g., CSR and channel segmentation strategies (Hult et al., 2022), at a more granular level, Helgesen (2007) identified quality products and service quality as the most influential drivers (antecedents) of customer satisfaction among Norwegian fish exporters. With respect to B2B marketing capabilities influencing customer satisfaction, 'new offering development' was found to be the key customer satisfaction driver (Cortes & Hidalgo, 2022). These drivers are specific or product-proximate rather than broad firm-level holistic strategic attributes. For example, a recent study focussed on exploring 'dynamic exporting capabilities', yet it did so only explicitly in relation to SMEs' profitability, albeit nonetheless acknowledging that "adaptation to better meet customer needs can increase customer satisfaction and thus increase market share for an exporting SME and enable it to capitalize on new market opportunities" (Miocevic, 2021, p. 24).

In this regard, our first hypothesis relates to our noted variables' combined influence on firms' export customer satisfaction. Towards this end, we present our first hypothesis H1: Configurations of exporting firms' adaptability capability, together with firms' export and demographic characteristics, lead to high export customer satisfaction in COVID-19 times.

2.2. Competitive advantage, adaptability capability and export customer satisfaction

Based on bundles of capabilities facilitating firm performance, we associate competitive advantages with an organisation's "develop[ed] attributes that allow it to outperform its competitors in a way that makes it difficult or impossible for competitors to imitate" (Efrat et al., 2018, p. 115; see also Sun & Tse, 2009). In our context we refer to "the relative superiority of the export venture's value offering to customers in the target export market and the cost of delivering this realized value" (Morgan et al., 2004, p. 91). Externally oriented, it discerns among competing alternative market offers. Generally, CA may initially be attributed to comparative state conditions such as innovation, differentiation, market positioning, enhanced product value, etc. (Cockburn et al., 2000; Efrat et al., 2018). However, "firms cannot achieve competitive advantage under a turbulent environment unless they utilize their [adaptive] capabilities in accordance with these conditions" (Efrat et al., 2018, p. 115). Indeed, if "firms in a rapidly changing market [are] more nimble, more able to change quickly, and more alert to changes in their competitive environment, they will be able to adapt to changing market conditions more rapidly than competitors, and thus can gain competitive advantage" (Barney et al., 2001, p. 631).

In tumultuous contexts, one may then indeed consider "adaptability the new competitive advantage" (Reeves et al., 2011, p.135). However, maintaining a distinction, adaptability, together with other dynamic capabilities "represent the export function's ability to integrate and reconfigure resources in order to enhance competitive advantage" (Efrat et al., 2018, p. 115), likely manifested in superior international business performance (Prange & Verdier, 2011). Although sometimes used interchangeably, CA does not however automatically equate to performance. Although distinct, it is nonetheless an important antecedent to superior performance. Furthermore, exporting firms sometimes experience difficulty extending domestic CAs to international markets (e.g., Marukawa, 2009). In this regard, the dynamic competitive nature of export markets require that firms seek CA in a quest for sustained presence and superior performance (Kaleka & Morgan, 2017). Drawing from Murray et al.'s (2011) empirical study on market orientation and performance of export ventures, "CA acts as an integrator of export capabilities, through which these capabilities are transformed into a significant value offering" (Efrat et al., 2018, p. 115). Complementing RBV fundamentals, yet from an external perspective, such defendable market positioning enhances CA sustainability based on the notion that to realise sustainable profit, a business requires enduring (competitive) advantage in either differentiation or cost leadership (Porter, 1980, 1985). In this regard, aligned with our study, Tan and Sousa (2015) bring together DC and CA perspectives, empirically observing strong positive effects of low-cost and differentiation advantages on export performance. Furthermore, they posit, "as firms continue to internationalise at an increasing rate and the competition in the global markets intensifies, the relevance of possessing the capabilities required to meet foreign customer requirements more effectively than competitors becomes ever more important" (p. 79). Similarly, we draw on Efrat et al.'s (2018) research on leveraging dynamic export capabilities for CA and performance in international markets, and for our purpose, we consider the following four CA elements for investigating our Chilean exporting firms: low cost of sales; product differentiation; new product introductions; and the depth and variety of products and services offered (broad product portfolio) (see also Morgan et al., 2004). Furthermore, Kaleka and Morgan (2017) empirically also establish the importance of 'service advantage' (besides 'price' and 'product' advantages) as a key CA significantly affecting market performance among manufacturing exporting firms. This is particularly relevant where distributors enjoy high-quality relationships with overseas customers, even in turbulent environments.

As inferred here, CA is positional, directly relating to customers' perceptions of the firm's offerings in a specific market, comparatively in relation to competitors' offerings. "Firms with offerings that achieve competitive advantage occupy a privileged position in customers' minds, as creators of superior value. This can be considered an indication of these customers' likelihood to buy offerings from the firm, thereby directly contributing to the improvement of the firm's market performance" (Kaleka & Morgan, 2017, p. 27; see also Adner & Zemsky, 2006; Grahovac & Miller, 2009). On this basis, we focus our study on export customer satisfaction, seeking to understand how these agribusiness firms' adaptability and competitiveness configurations may have influenced it in COVID-19 times. Consolidating these perspectives, it is important to consider the mediating role of competitive advantages in mediating the link between dynamic capabilities and performance in export markets (Efrat et al., 2018), particularly in the novel circumstances presented by the pandemic. Indeed, Barney et al. (2001, p. 631) argue that in turbulent environments, unless firms use and deploy their capabilities in alignment with such conditions, they cannot achieve CA. In this regard, we present our second hypothesis H2: Exporting firms' competitive advantage positively moderates the impact of configurations of export adaptability together with firms' export and demographic characteristics, resulting in high export customer satisfaction in COVID-19 times.

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE, METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Aligned with our established rationale, the objective of our research is twofold. First, to explore the combined impact of firms' export adaptability dynamic capabilities, together with specific exporter characteristics, on export customer satisfaction in COVID-19 times. Second, to analyse the moderating effect of the firms' competitive advantage on this relationship.

We adopt a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) approach. We rely on the fsQCA technique since we believe that it better identifies the high degree of complexity that can be captured through testing theory-based conditions and contextual influences rather than focusing on single effects of individual variables, as traditional correlation models do (Kraus et al., 2018). Stressing this argument, Kumar et al. (2022) say that asymmetrical techniques such as fsQCA better predict and explain real-world business phenomena using a configurational approach.

In contrast to correlational techniques, we used a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), which allows a detailed and empirical investigation of causal complexity through the logic of set theory (Misangyi et al., 2017), since it identifies causes for a result that can be derived from several different combinations (Ragin, 2008); or in other words, the focus is on what conditions lead to a given outcome (Elliot, 2013). In short, multiple relationships can demonstrate different behaviours, the so-called equifinality (Elliot, 2013; Huarng et al., 2019). A fsQCA is not about independent effects, but combined effects (Elliot, 2013). Finally, this method rests on the belief that relationships are asymmetrical; its set relationships are not affected by different biases, such as the size of the sample (Elliot, 2013).

In consolidation, decisively three features underlie fsQCA's suitability for our study. First, it is well-suited for examining attributes dependent on each other, where consequently conventional linear methodologies would not be appropriate due to their assumptions of independence (Greckhamer et al., 2008). Second, fsQCA facilitates the interpretation of multiple interaction effects at the same time (Harms et al., 2009), which conversely would have been challenging using regression techniques (Vis, 2012). Importantly, such interaction effects can involve not only multiple variables, but also ones operating at different levels of analysis (Misangyi et al.,

2017), as in the case of this study. Third, configurational approaches including fsQCA allow for a more fine-grained understanding of phenomena, since organisations are studied as sets of firms that are similar across relevant dimensions, rather than exhibiting relationships manifest across all organisations (Short et al., 2008).

Our study investigates agri-food exporting companies. Aligned with the pandemic context and circumstances, activity for the year 2020 was considered. According to a Universidad Austral (Chile) report, during the first quarter of 2020, a 50% drop in agri-food sector sales was observed following the COVID-19 outbreak. To provide some situational context, nearly 1,400 containers full of Chilean produce (mainly berries, blueberries, wine and seafood) were waiting to be unloaded in ports worldwide. This was especially evident in China, a strategically important destination country for Chile. China received only 40-50 containers from Chile during this period – much lower than the 200-350 daily containers normally landed. To minimise losses, Chilean industries were resorting to re-sending or rerouting their consigned deliveries (Segovia, 2020).

A total of 244 exporting companies in the region were identified. Through the Datasur database (www.datasur.com), information was obtained for each export operation in 2020 from the three regions of southern Chile under study, associated with the Harmonized System chapters 01 to 24 (HS Codes associated with agribusiness products). In the database, each company is identified by its name and tax identification number.

Respective firms' export managers' contacts were sought through the Internet (name, telephone number and email). Information was obtained for 155 companies, which were invited to participate in the research. The companies were called and emailed the questionnaire, and subsequently contacted to answer it between the months of June and September 2021. A total of 37 completed questionnaires were obtained, representing a response rate of 24%. It should be noted that during this time, the COVID-19 health situation in Chile was not favourable – with pandemic circumstances presenting operational disruption, hindering communication, notwithstanding persistent attempts. Intermittent mandated lockdowns often resulted in rapid shifts in and out of remote working arrangements – away from the businesses' formal registered addresses associated with their official corporate contacts and phone numbers. Furthermore, many companies were struggling to cope, adjust and survive, making it difficult to access and get information from executives.

Ragin's Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is often used with small to medium-sized samples where the researcher has good case knowledge (Cooper & Glaesser, 2016). Since the authors possess a sound knowledge of the agri-food sector in Chile (one of the co-authors owns a Chilean agri-food company), this method is considered most adequate for small-*n* studies (i.e., involving between ten and fifty cases; deemed too large for traditional qualitative analysis, yet at the same time too small for many established statistical analysis approaches). Kraus et al. (2018) recognize this as one of the key strengths of the fsQCA method we adopt (Ragin, 2000; Fiss, 2007; Ragin, 2008). Accounting for both perspectives required (contextual knowledge and qualitative insights offered by this method), Kumar et al. (2022) highlight that fsQCA offers both the rationale and methodological rigor appropriate for case-oriented qualitative methods needed for capturing rich contextual information when dealing with small-*n* samples.

The companies surveyed were mainly SMEs (52.9%) that had been in operation on average for more than 22.3 years, and exporting for 19 years – with exports constituting more than 60% of total sales.

Most of the variables and measures were sourced from existing scales in the literature, and based on Efrat et al. (2018). Thus, since our key explanatory variable 'export adaptability' refers to the firm's capacity to reconfigure its resource-base to adapt quickly to competitor actions and external threats (Efrat et al., 2018), it is gauged as proposed by Cadogan et al. (2003), reflecting ability to adjust to environmental conditions in a timely fashion. Consequently, its extent was measured via the following three sub-question statements focused on the adaptation capability of the firm: (1) 'If a major competitor were to launch an intensive campaign targeted at our foreign customers, we would adapt immediately'; (2) 'We are very quick to adapt to significant changes in our competitors' price structures in foreign markets'; (3) 'We can easily adapt to competitive actions that threaten us in our export markets'. Each of these three items were measured on a scale ranging from 1 to 7. Finally, we built an adding variable ranging from 3 to 21. Firms' export CA was measured on the basis of the four different competitive advantages derived from Morgan et al. (2004) and Kaleka (2002). The items included in our questionnaire related to achieving a competitive advantage in the following dimensions: low cost of sales, product differentiation, new product introductions, and product line breadth/depth. The extent for each of the four competitive advantage items likewise ranged along a scale from 1 to 7. We then proceeded to consolidate these into a variable representing the firm's overall potential extent of export CA. Export customer satisfaction emphasises that the goal of marketing activities is often to establish satisfied and loyal customers (Hooley et al., 1998). This validity is corroborated by the high significant standardised factor loadings of satisfaction in relation to the export performance construct empirically observed by both Hultman et al. (2009), as well as Efrat et al. (2018) – at 0.76 and 0.77 respectively. Thus, given this association and importance, we asked the firms for their degree of agreement with the statement: 'Our export customers are very satisfied'. Similarly, the answer representing their extent of agreement could be valued across a range from 1 (strongly disagree), to 7 (strongly agree). Regarding control variables, firm size has long been considered an important variable and determinant in firms' internationalisation processes and export performance (e.g., Bilkey & Tesar, 1977; Bonaccorsi, 1992). In recent years, the literature on export performance has focused on SMEs (Sousa et al., 2008). Thus, we created a dummy variable indicating whether the firm is a SME (value = 1) or a large one (value = 0) based on employment level criteria. Aligned with the Chilean SME definition for labour purposes (Estatuto PYME: Ley N° 20.416), SME qualification was determined on whether or not the firm had less than 199 employees. In addition, prior activity associated with international exposure and experience also enhances internationalisation and export performance (Hollender et al., 2017). To measure such prior export activity, we employed three variables: whether the firm is a permanent / regular exporter, via a dummy variable considering whether the firm was engaged in ongoing export activity over the past years; export intensity, i.e., the percentage of the firm's exports in relation to total sales; and export experience, a key factor for companies in relation to acquiring knowledge about export markets (Geldres-Weiss et al., 2016) – this was considered on the basis of the total number of years the company had been exporting (Oura et al., 2016).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Set-theoretic analysis requires a prior transformation of variables into sets that are calibrated in terms of full membership, the cross-over point of maximum ambiguity and full non-membership regarding membership in the set of interest (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2000, 2008). These values are qualitative anchors that calibrate a measure with regard to substantively meaningful thresholds. This calibration is essential to any set-theoretic analysis because it determines which cases belong to each of the sets analysed, and therefore the results obtained

are sensitive to such calibration (Ragin, 2008). Only in the case of dummy variables (0/1) can this calibration be exerted directly from the original variable into a crisp set, where 1 indicates full membership and 0 indicates full non-membership. Table 1 details the data calibration process. The highest level is considered as completely inside, the middle level as a crossover point or neither completely inside nor completely outside, and the lowest level as completely outside. Thus, adopting the direct method described by Ragin (2008), non-dummy variables were calibrated using 20%, 50% and 80% percentiles to create a fuzzy set, following Fiss's (2011) and García-Castro and Aguilera's (2014) approach.

Tab. 1 – Set calibration description. Source: own research

	Mean Value	Membership criteria		
		Full membership	Crossover point	Full non-membership
Export adaptability	15.81	19	16	14
Competitive advantage	18.67	21	19	16
Export performance	6.33	7	6	5
Age	22.38	30	21	10
SME	Crisp set (1,0)			
Permanent exporter	Crisp set (1,0)			
Export Intensity	67.66	90	78	35
Export Experience	18.33	28	19	8

Some causes are more important than others. Some are so important, that the outcome does not happen in their absence. In our case, even when not being sufficient to reach a high export customer satisfaction on their own, they are necessary in any causal combination that leads to the outcome. When examining the necessity analysis results (Table 2), only the consistency value of being a permanent exporter is over 0.90, the minimum threshold required to argue that a variable is a necessary cause for an outcome, which implies that instances of the outcome will constitute a subset of instances of this cause (Ragin, 2006).

Tab. 2 – Necessity analysis. Source: own research

Outcome variable: export performance		
	Consistency	Coverage
Export adaptability	0.651163	0.736842
~ Export adaptability	0.488372	0.583333
Competitive advantage	0.651163	0.756757
~ Competitive advantage	0.488372	0.567568
Age	0.558140	0.615385
~ Age	0.581395	0.714286
SME	0.441860	0.558824
~ SME	0.558140	0.600000
Permanent exporter	0.953488	0.585714
~ Permanent exporter	0.046512	0.500000
Export Intensity	0.604651	0.650000
~ Export Intensity	0.534884	0.676471
Export Experience	0.558140	0.648649
~Export Experience	0.627907	0.729730

Table 3 shows the results of our fuzzy-set analysis. We found four configurations meeting the following conditions: 1 and 2 including export adaptability and the considered control variables; and 3 and 4, which add to both determinants the firm's competitive advantage, thus, analysing its moderating impact.

Tab. 3 – Fuzzy set results (Intermediate solution). Source: own research

OUTCOME: Export performance				
Firm variables	Model 1[1]		Model 2[1]	
	(1) Firms with the capability of export adaptability, young, SME, permanent exporter, with high export intensity and with low export experience	(2) Firms with the capability of export adaptability, old, SME, permanent exporter, with high export intensity and with high export experience	(3) Firms with the capability of export adaptability, young, SME, permanent exporter, with high export intensity and with low export experience; and intensively developing a competitive advantage	(4) Firms with the capability of export adaptability, old, SME, permanent exporter, with high export intensity and with high export experience; and intensively developing a competitive advantage
Export adaptability	●	●	●	●
Competitive advantage	-	-	●	●
Age	ø	●	ø	●
SME	●	●	●	●
Permanent exporter	●	●	●	●
Export Intensity	●	ø	●	ø
Export Experience	ø	ø	ø	ø
Configuration consistency	0.857143	0.833333	1.000000	1.000000
Configuration raw coverage	0.139535	0.116279	0.116279	0.116279
Configuration unique coverage	0.116279	0.093023	0.093023	0.093023
Full solution Consistency	0.833333		1.000000	
Full solution coverage	0.232558		0.209302	

[1]Model 1 refers to the joint effect of export adaptability (together with some control variables) on export performance, while model 2 refers to the moderating impact of competitive advantage in the previous relationship. Full circles (●) indicate the presence of a condition, and circles with a diagonal line (ø) indicate its absence. In crisp sets, the presence/absence of a condition means that the degree of membership in the set is exactly 1/0, whereas in fuzzy sets, the presence/absence of a condition means that the degree of membership is over/below the crossover point (i.e., membership higher than 0.5).

In consolidating our analysis, we relate our findings to the established hypotheses. In relation to H1, both configurations 1 and 2 indicate that the presence of the "export adaptability" DC, together with some control variables, lead to high export customer satisfaction. Upon thorough examination, it is evident that in these two configurations, the two control variables, the presence of which (together with adaptability capability) intensively favour satisfying the customer, are being an SME, and a permanent exporter. The importance of being a small firm to improving the effectiveness of a firm's adaptability in its export activity is explained by the fact that these firms generally tend to be more agile and flexible when having to answer to the specific needs of a given market – and are therefore likely more ready to adapt themselves. On the other hand, the significance of being a permanent exporter corroborates the importance of accruing knowledge about export markets, thus mitigating risk, and on the basis of experience enhancing know-how and awareness, generally complemented with well-established networks

of international contacts accrued over time, consequently enabling the firm to better adapt to foreign demands and shifting dynamics (Eriksson et al. 2000).

Additionally, research consolidating findings on customer satisfaction studies in international contexts observed that, among B2B and importer-exporter relationships, trust, communication and social networks, together with reputation, play an important role (Hult et al., 2022). These tend to be all enhanced through experience, exposure and relationships via ongoing international activity, as well as the more organic management operations and direct communication approaches typical of smaller organisations – often seeing the owner-managing director involved in a more hands-on manner, interacting directly with clients. Furthermore, research in this regard highlighted that the perceived added value lending to such customer satisfaction in international business is the removal of decision-making uncertainty, accentuated in export contexts, most especially in times of crisis (Hult et al., 2022, p. 1717-1720). Especially in SMEs, much often depends on managers' characteristics and interactions (Vardarsuyu et al., 2024).

This result regarding being a permanent exporter substantiates what was found prior in our necessity analysis, in which such a covariate was shown to have a high consistency value, suggesting it is a necessary cause for an outcome. Finally, when analysing the consistency values, in all configurations, the full solution is high, at over 0.83. This means the degree to which the solution terms and the solution as a whole are subsets of the outcome is rather high (Ragin, 2006). All these results lead us to accept H1. Drawing from our analysis in considering the validity of H2, configurations 3 and 4 both indicate that having a strong CA intensifies the previous relationship (H1). This corroborates the importance of having a competitive strategic superiority along some difference in comparison with competitors in export markets, as underlined by the seminal strategy literature on the topic (e.g., Porter, 1990). This superiority may derive from any of the four dimensions underlined by Morgan et al. (2004), or combinations thereof: low cost of sales, product differentiation, new product introductions, product line breadth/depth. Here, the consistency value is maximum for both configurations 3 and 4, essentially validating H2.

This aligns with extant research on customer satisfaction in international business, where key elements such as costs, as well as product / service attributes such as personalisation were also deemed as directly impacting (Hult et al., 2022).

5 CONCLUSION

In the context of this study, the two objectives were fulfilled, confirming both hypotheses. Our two hypotheses bring together two perspectives meriting further investigation. Barney et al. (2001) underline the need to better understand the capabilities leading to CA (see also Efrat et al., 2018). At this nexus, our study explored these convergent and interrelated aspects of adaptability in relation to CA and the resultant extent of export customer satisfaction ensuing from international activity, in the case of Chilean agribusinesses facing up to the pandemic's turmoil in international markets. We conclude that in COVID-19 times, the jointly considered interrelationships between the extent of exporting firms' adaptability capabilities, organisational characteristics, and prior international exposure, and their concomitant influence on export customers' satisfaction, have a marked effect on their international performance and prospects for survival amid unforeseen disruption. Furthermore, we observe the role of CA positively mediating the link between DCs and performance in export markets, particularly in

the novel crisis circumstances presented by the pandemic, thereby confirming Efrat et al.'s (2018) and Barney et al.'s (2001) findings.

Our findings provide a number of lessons that could help exporting firms enhance their competitiveness. Complementarily, our results suggest that some conditions and firm characteristics are important in enhancing the prospects for realising higher export customer satisfaction in a crisis situation such as the unforeseen disruption presented by the pandemic. These conditions include the presence of the 'export adaptability' DC, together with being an SME and a permanent exporter. These findings align with and support evidence provided by the recent (pre-pandemic) literature in Efrat et al.'s (2018) research; as well as that of Barney et al. (2001). In connection with our three sub-question statements representing the adaptability DC (1: 'If a major competitor were to launch an intensive campaign targeted at our foreign customers, we would adapt immediately'; 2: 'We are very quick to adapt to significant changes in our competitors' price structures in foreign markets'; and 3: 'We can easily adapt to competitive actions which threaten us in our export markets'), the ensuing result provides managers with the understanding that the firm's capability to effectively adapt to other competitors' offensive campaigns (be they changes in price or any other competitive action directed at their export customers), together with the firm's reaction and prompt response, enhances the export client's prospects to realise better overall customer satisfaction, especially when any such new offerings are based on a CA (such as for example, low costs, or differentiation). This was observed as being especially relevant during as well as after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, and crucially in the agri-food sector (Richards & Rickard, 2020; Aday & Aday, 2020).

Two main strategic policy-related recommendations emerge from our findings. First, local regional governments' support for agribusiness SMEs' internationalisation is likely to effectively promote the sector's export activity in international markets in such (pandemic crisis) circumstances. Second, of strategic significance at firm-level and confirmed by our findings, is the association whereby having a strong extent of CA acts as a catalyst and intensifies the relationship between the 'export adaptability' DC and higher export customer satisfaction. In this regard, strengthening the CA of SMEs in the agri-food sector should be given priority by national export promotion policy, given that SMEs in this sector would be better and more competitively able to face the increasingly disruptive and turbulent environments of international markets, aligned with current trends in world trade dynamics.

In interpreting our findings and consolidating conclusions, two limitations of our study should be noted, which in themselves propose future lines of study to further develop our preliminary research. In our results, in both cases the coverage of the considered solutions drops to values below 0.25, especially in case of configurations 3 and 4. This indicates that the outcome in question may be better explained by other solutions. This may encourage further research exploring other firm determinants that complement and combine with 'adaptation capability' in seeking to enhance and improve export performance. The second limitation relates to sample size. Mandatory national restrictions imposed by the pandemic and associated disruption resulting from uncertainty, saw many companies telecommuting, off-site from registered addresses and often away from their official fixed telephone lines, rendering several firms difficult or impossible to contact over several attempts. This made it hard to secure a greater number of participants and key respondents. Thus, a follow-up study on how agribusiness companies continue to adapt to volatile world markets is welcome.

In concluding, post-COVID, one nonetheless more broadly observes a persistent growing incidence of anticipated turbulence or externally-induced crises, manifested in disruption and uncertainty for firms worldwide (Ledesma-Chaves & Arenas-Gaitán, 2022), whether as a result of, e.g., natural phenomena associated with global warming, or geo-political tensions. In this regard, international business as well as agribusiness contexts present a particularly susceptible and critically sensitive reality.

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