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Article abstract

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Direct or Indirect Exporting? The Joint Influence of Gender and Immigration Background on Export Strategies of Canadian SMEs

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ABSTRACT

Given the challenges women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face in global markets, we investigate the effects of gender and immigrant background on their direct versus indirect export strategies. Drawing on insights from social capital theory, our analysis consists of a sample of 109 Canadian SMEs. We found that although women-majority-owned SMEs are less likely to export directly compared to their men-majority-owned counterparts, women owners with an immigrant background have the potential to overcome network-related barriers, thus weakening the negative effect of gender on direct exporting. These results point to the significance of having access to international networks and the necessity to leverage this linkage to support the direct exporting approach for women-majority-owned SMEs. Our research guides SME owners and managers with global aspirations. We suggest policymakers develop initiatives to encourage women owners to identify, build, and cultivate international business relationships and improve the design and implementation of policies targeted at immigrant export businesses.

Key Words: Direct export; indirect export; women; immigrant ownership; international business; SMEs

INTRODUCTION

Women entrepreneurs' rapid growth and contribution to economic growth and employment have been widely documented worldwide (Iakovleva et al., 2013; Rosenbaum, 2019). In Canada, although 70% of women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are willing to export, they are underperforming compared with male-owned SMEs in export markets (Government of Canada, 2016). The Government of Canada has traditionally encouraged SMEs to export (Fraser Institute, 2016; Sui & Tapp, 2016) and, more recently, has been exploring ways to specifically help women-owned SMEs in exporting (Government of Canada, 2020). Thus, it has both practical and academic significance to understand how and why women SME owners differ from their men peers in exporting activities.

All authors have contributed equally.

This article is an extension of Xiaojing Wang's master's thesis.

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Prior studies often use liberal and social feminism to explain gender differences in business behavior (Black, 1989; Li, et al., 2022; Orser et al., 2010; Watson, 2010). As diversity in the workplace has gained momentum in the past two decades (e.g., Mousa & Puhakka, 2019; Pitts, 2009; Singh et al., 2023), more studies are trying to explain the effects of gender on business performance (Ben-Amar et al., 2013), innovation, and reputation (Brammer et al., 2009; Miller & del Carmen Triana, 2009; Ruth & Sui, 2022). However, gaps exist in understanding women-owned SMEs' specific challenges faced in global markets (Robichaud et al., 2015). Although research shows that business owners with immigrant backgrounds have export-enabling characteristics (Morgan et al., 2021), there is a lack of research on how SMEs owned by women with immigrant backgrounds choose their strategy, especially when the export strategy is fine-grained as direct exporting (i.e., selling goods or services directly to customers overseas) and indirect exporting (i.e., selling goods or services to customers overseas through an intermediary) (Peng & York, 2001).

Our research explores the influence of business owners' gender and immigrant background on their direct or indirect export decisions by raising the following research questions: How does gender affect an owner's decision to export directly or indirectly when they decide to export? Do gender effects, if any, depend on the immigrant status of owners? We apply a social capital perspective, which takes social capital as a resource that accrues to individuals because of their relationship with others (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Our research argues that immigrant ownership significantly positively affects the likelihood of SMEs exporting directly compared to non-immigrant-owned counterparts. Although women-majority-owned SMEs are less likely to export directly compared to their men-majority-owned counterparts, we expect women immigrant owners to benefit from their immigrant background by establishing and controlling the linkages in the foreign market. We empirically validate our framework using survey data from 109 SMEs in Canada.

Our research contributes to the increasing body of research on gender differences (Orser et al., 2010; Runyan et al., 2006) and immigrant background (Herander & Saavedra, 2005; Hernandez, 2014; Morgan et al., 2018) in international entrepreneurship. Specifically, it clarifies and verifies the role that gender and immigrant status play in SMEs' choice of exporting strategy. In addition, it offers valuable insights that women business owners stand to gain significantly from initiatives that enhance their ability to establish and manage international business relationships. Policymakers should develop suitable export support programs for entrepreneurs, especially women entrepreneurs seeking to expand into international markets.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Direct Exporting versus Indirect Exporting

SMEs typically lack essential resources like market strength and industry knowledge, which results in less established business systems (Hessels & Terjesen, 2010; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Watson, 2010). Still, global markets could allow them to grow and prosper (Knight, 2000). However, these markets are competitive, resource-demanding, and uncertain (Johanson & Vahlne 1977). Under these conditions, SMEs are likely to face additional costs, such as increased costs associated with gathering information on foreign customers and partners; elevated risk factors, including adverse unexpected changes in economic, social, or political aspects of foreign markets (i.e., foreign exchange fluctuations, opportunistic foreign partners, and social or political disruptions); the increased potential for substantial losses due to the inability to reliably predict foreign demand conditions, among other challenges (Cavusgil et al., 2020). Given SMEs' limited resources and capabilities, the excessive global expansion demands could overwhelm many. This calls for a careful approach to international strategy selection when conducting business globally.

Research shows that SMEs predominantly rely on an export strategy (Baum et al., 2015; Golovko & Valentini, 2011), a vital foreign entry mode, and an initial step toward internationalization for most SMEs (Acs et al., 1997; Reynolds, 1997). Although exporting is less demanding than other foreign entry modes (i.e., international joint ventures and foreign direct investments) (Brouthers et al., 2008; Leonidou & Katsikeas, 2010), SME owners must figure out whether to export through direct versus indirect channels. Specifically, while direct exporting involves directly selling goods or services to foreign customers, indirect exporting refers to situations in which intermediates facilitate transactions between a domestic business and its foreign customers (e.g., Hessels & Terjesen, 2010). SME owners must weigh the costs and benefits of direct and indirect exporting to reach an optimal export-channel decision.

When SMEs engage in direct exporting, they can cultivate relationships with foreign customers, control their product pricing, and keep a potentially more significant share of profits from foreign sales (Leonidou & Katsikeas, 2010). On the other hand, they can accelerate their entry into foreign markets with limited foreign market knowledge or investments when they rely on an indirect export channel (Hessels & Terjesen, 2010). Consequently, the latter channel can be an attractive option for SMEs. However, there are drawbacks to using intermediaries. Precisely, as potentially powerful economic actors, they can increase the cost of doing business abroad and opportunistically appropriate the returns to exporting through excessive fees or commissions (Acs & Terjesen, 2007; Blomstermo et al. 2006; Hessels & Terjesen, 2010). In addition, intermediaries may also block exporters from acquiring knowledge and reduce knowledge transfer, thus potentially undermining exporters' innovation capabilities (Di Cintio et al., 2020). The disadvantages of indirect exporting could make direct exporting more appealing to some SME owners (Elango & Pangarkar, 2020). However, the anticipated benefits of direct exporting will not materialize if they meet the resource requirements of the latter.

The Higher Social Capital Requirement of Direct Exporting versus Indirect Exporting

The need for cross-border social capital is a vital resource requirement that separates direct and indirect exporting as international strategic options for SMEs. Social capital embodies the resources individuals derive from being embedded in a network of social or business relationships (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Gedajlovic et al., 2013). Moreover, we recognize that internationalizing firms can overcome barriers to global expansion and gain an international competitive advantage when they have border-spanning social capital (Bloodgood et al., 1996; Eriksson et al., 1997; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). For example, such social capital can accelerate the market entry speed and improve business performance, such as growth and profitability (Dimitratos & Plakoyiannaki, 2003; Donckels & Lambrecht, 1995; Ong et al., 2022). More generally, having social capital across national borders is indispensable for learning and capability development in foreign markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). By extension, such social capital also facilitates essential international entrepreneurial tasks—from identifying to evaluating, developing, and exploiting opportunities in foreign markets (Chen & Tan, 2009; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Pinho, 2016).

If SME owners establish and maintain strong social or business connections in their home and export markets, they can bypass intermediaries and thrive as direct exporters (Hernandez, 2014; Tvede & Ohnemus, 2001). On the contrary, SME owners may have to pursue international success through indirect export channels when their cross-border social capital is inadequate (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Carson et al., 2004; Dunning, 2001). Consistent with this view, there is evidence that SMEs' social capital exerts the most significant influence on their export performance (Easmon et al., 2019). In sum, SME owners are likely to consider the international reach of their social networks when deciding whether to use a direct or indirect export channel.

SME owners' gender and export strategy

Since SMEs' cross-border social capital is a function of their owners' social networks, differences in cross-border social capital can arise from differences in SME owner characteristics. Prior research indicates that business owners' gender and immigrant status deserve special attention (Ashourizadeh et al., 2016; Brush & Hisrich, 1991; Orser et al., 2010; Powell & Ansic, 1997; Reavley et al., 2005; Sonfield et al., 2001). Starting with gender, prior research suggests that women entrepreneurs are often disadvantaged in terms of their social networks, among other things (Robinson & Stubberud, 2009). Unlike their men counterparts, women owners generally have less access to social networks that can facilitate learning and development in international markets (Cromie & Birley, 1992; Perrin Moore, 2004), which puts them in a disadvantageous position. However, the empirical evidence suggests that the gender-exporting relationship is mixed. Some studies indicate that women exporters can fare worse than their men peers because of resource deficiencies—which could partially emanate from women's weaker position in leading international business networks (Orser et al., 2010). Meanwhile, there is evidence that some women-owned export businesses perform better financially when adopting an intensive export strategy than similar men-owned export businesses (Sui et al., 2022). Despite this inconclusive evidence, most research shows that women-owned businesses lack access to international business networks that drive global expansion in SMEs. Consequently, women owners could find it more challenging to meet the social capital requirement of direct exporting than men (Pergelova et al., 2018).

Theoretically, we can relate gender to export strategy by applying liberal or social feminism. According to a liberal feminist perspective, women and men are equally competent; hence, gender differences in business strategy and performance likely reflect the systematic barriers women face in the business environment (Fischer et al., 1993). Such barriers could make it difficult for women business owners to access influential, men-dominated networks (Abor & Biekpe, 2006; Ahl, 2006; Cromie & Birley, 1992; Fischer et al., 1993; Hofstede, 1980). More generally, there can be gender differences in power, social structure, and class structure within and across organizations and societies (Gupta et al., 2014). Thus, women may view and respond to global opportunities differently depending on social conventions, even with the same resources and skill levels (Kabeer, 2005; Pergelova et al., 2018). These gendered circumstances could partly explain why some women express lower entrepreneurial intentions in some contexts than men (Gupta et al., 2014; Tinkler et al., 2015). In the recent two decades, diversity management has been regarded as a practice to secure equality, respect, appreciation, and engagement (Bizri, 2018; Mousa et al., 2020). However, gender differences in social status and power can persist (Hekman et al., 2017).

According to a social feminist perspective, women and men may have different preferences or dispositions (Fischer et al., 1993) and adopt different business approaches (Orser et al., 2010; Watson & Robinson, 2003). In this case, gender differences could be manifested in women's relatively low motivation to grow their business rapidly (Watson & Robinson, 2003). Gender differences in preferences could play out in other ways. For example, some scholars claim that women-owned firms tend to be more risk-averse (Aculai et al., 2006; Powell & Ansic, 1997). In practice, it remains an empirical question whether the evidence is more consistent with a liberal or social feminist perspective. Meanwhile, gender-specific barriers and preferences could influence gender differences in business strategy and performance.

SME owners' immigrant background and export strategy

Turning to the other owner attribute, we focus on SME owners' immigrant status. In this case, SMEs can vary in export strategy because immigrant and non-immigrant owners differ in cross-border social capital. Prior studies associate immigrant ownership with an increased potential for global expansion (Bolzani & Boari, 2018; Head & Ries, 1998), especially export activity (Girma & Yu, 2002; Herander & Saavedra, 2005). There is also evidence that immigrant-owned SMEs are more likely than non-immigrant-owned SMEs to export directly (Sui et al., 2015). This is possible because immigrant owners have valuable human and social capital that supports business development and success in international markets, including their country of origin (Morgan et al., 2018). For example, immigrant owners can leverage their cross-border networks and first-hand foreign knowledge (e.g., prior knowledge of local language, customs, laws, and business practices in their countries of origin) when scanning foreign markets. These sources of advantages can also reduce perceived uncertainty and improve export operations (Kunczer et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2021). These insights suggest that SME owners' immigrant backgrounds can increase direct versus indirect exporting propensity.

Taken together, these insights suggest that a social capital perspective is helpful for understanding the drivers of SMEs' export strategy. Specifically, we expect SMEs' choice between direct and indirect exporting partially depends on their owners' gender and immigrant status. At the same time, we can gain even more insights from accounting for these two factors together rather than separately. In the next section, we will elaborate on these conceptual insights.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Building on the articulated social capital framework, we expect SMEs to choose different export channels when they are owned by women versus men. As previously discussed, prior research contends that external impediments prevent women from starting and growing businesses. Women are less engaged and less confident in their entrepreneurial abilities, partly due to cultural conventions, stereotypes, and a lack of role models (Piacentini, 2013). In line with the liberal feminist perspective, women business owners face barriers that might limit their access to networks that facilitate learning and capability development in foreign markets. One reason for this is that such networks are likely to be dominated by men, and hence, they are more likely to attract and benefit men (McPherson et al., 2001). In addition, women entrepreneurs might have had fewer opportunities to cultivate such networks in their work lives. For example, prior research has indicated that women managers are less likely to receive promotions to senior management roles than men managers (Cromie & Birley, 1992; Jenssen, 2001; Nelson, 1987). Under these circumstances, women owners will have fewer opportunities than men to establish and sustain trusted business relationships with foreign customers. In addition, women owners are likely to be at a relative disadvantage when estimating foreign demand conditions, pricing their goods or services, and serving foreign customers. These disadvantages can translate into a weaker potential for direct versus indirect exporting; hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Women-majority-owned SMEs are less likely to export directly compared to their men-majority-owned counterparts.

In contrast to women-owned SMEs in general, SMEs with immigrant owners will be better positioned to use a direct export channel than SMEs with non-immigrant owners. We re-emphasize that immigrant-owned SMEs are more internationally oriented than their native-born peers because they have export-enabling characteristics (Chiswick & Miller, 2002; Sui et al., 2015). When compared to non-immigrant-owned enterprises, immigrant-owned firms have a much higher propensity to engage in transnational economic activity (Wang & Liu, 2015). In particular, they have strong ties to networks that enable them to learn and develop capabilities to directly identify and pursue opportunities in foreign markets (Morgan et al., 2018; Sui et al., 2015). A solid social network creates the foundation and adequate resources for expanding an international business and eliminates using an intermediary when exporting (Arregle et al., 2007). In other words, since immigrant owners have pre-existing social ties in their country of origin and other foreign countries, they already have first-hand information about foreign customers and how to serve them. Consequently, they can better estimate foreign demand, price their goods or services for international sales, and perform other tasks that support direct exporting. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Immigrant-owned SMEs are more likely to export directly than non-immigrant-owned counterparts.

So far, we have theorized about the separated effects of gender and immigrant status on SMEs' propensity for direct or indirect exporting. We consider the combined effect of these two owner characteristics to extend our social capital framework. Specifically, it would be helpful to know whether and why SMEs favor direct exporting versus indirect exporting when they have women owners with an immigrant background. We have argued that women business owners generally lack access to foreign networks that support them in pursuing a direct export strategy. However, the situation is different for women owners with an immigrant background. Having initially lived or worked in a foreign country, immigrant women owners come to their country of residence with pre-existing social ties in foreign markets. Hence, they can overcome the traditional barriers that other women business owners face in such markets (Collins & Low, 2010; Runyan et al., 2006). Specifically, we expect immigrant women owners to fare better when understanding foreign customers and serving them satisfactorily. Consequently, they will likely favor direct exporting over indirect exporting. Thus, we proposed this final hypothesis:

H3: The negative effects of women-majority ownership on direct exporting are weaker when women owners have an immigrant background.

METHODOLOGY

Data Construction

We applied purposeful sampling to reliably develop the data required to test our proposed hypotheses (Campbell et al., 2020). Specifically, we identified similar numbers of women and immigrant participants as their men and non-immigrant counterparts. A survey targeting Canadian SMEs was conducted between February 2018 and May 2018, with 40% of the respondents captured through entrepreneurship events, immigrant women in business organizations, and Toronto local networking groups. The remaining respondents were reached through Prolific and Maru Blue, two crowdsourcing platforms with a chosen target audience. Since this study is focused on SMEs' export strategy, SMEs' owners/managers were potential participants. To maintain information confidentiality, participants of the survey remained anonymous. We received a total sample of 187 responses, with 109 valid responses, representing an approximate response rate of 58.3%.

Table 1 provides names and descriptions of the main variables used in this study.

Table 2 provides the main variables' means, standard deviations, and correlations. The multicollinearity did not warrant special attention in the statistical analysis because the sizes of the correlations between each variable are less than 0.5.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variable, *Export Strategy*, is a categorical variable with three outcomes: *Direct Export* if the firm exports into the international market without an intermediary; *Indirect Export* if the firm exports into the international market through an intermediary, and *Domestic* if the firm does not export (Bernard et al., 2011; Peng & York, 2001). Specifically, we confirmed with respondents their export strategy for their primary product or service.

Explanatory Variables

The first primary independent variable, *Woman*, is a dummy variable that equals one if a firm is women-majority-owned (women own more than 50% of the firm) (Orser et al., 2010). The second primary independent variable, *Immigrant*, is a dummy variable, which equals one if the owner or manager of the firm was born outside of Canada (Morgan et al., 2018). Both variables have been widely used in entrepreneurship research to evaluate businesses' export behaviors. Combining the gender and immigrant ownership information, firms can be categorized into four groups: (1) *Woman Immigrant*; (2) *Man Immigrant*; (3) *Woman Non-Immigrant*; and (4) *Man Non-Immigrant*.

Table 3 describes the number of observations and percentage of each group with their corresponding export strategies. The percentages of all respondents who export directly, indirectly, and do not export are 37.6%, 26.6%, and 35.8%, respectively. The SMEs owned by women immigrants have the highest average percentage of exporting directly among all groups. The SMEs owned by women non-immigrants have the highest average percentage of indirect exports among all groups.

Control Variables

This study identifies seven control variables that may affect business owners' export strategies.

Firm Size is measured by the firm's full-time employee's number. The previous study suggested that larger firms are more likely to use aggressive export strategies (Sui & Baum, 2014).

Firm Age is measured by the years the business has been established. Previous studies suggested that older firms are more likely to export since they are more likely to have superior resources such as overseas market knowledge and connections (Neville et al., 2014; Williams, 2011).

TABLE 1 Variable Names and Definitions

Names	Description
Export Strategy	A categorical variable which equals one if a firm exports directly to a global market without an intermediary; equals two if it exports indirectly to a global market through an intermediary; and equals three if it does not export.
Direct Export	A dummy variable which equals one if a firm exports directly to a global market without an intermediary, and zero otherwise.
Indirect Export	A dummy variable which equals one if a firm exports indirectly to a global market through an intermediary, and zero otherwise.
Domestic	A dummy variable which equals one if a firm does not export at all, and zero otherwise.
Woman	A dummy variable which equals one if a firm is women-majority-owned, and zero otherwise.
Immigrant	A dummy variable which equals one if the owner/manager of the firm was born outside Canada, and zero otherwise.
Firm Size	A categorical variable which equals zero if the number of full-time employees is 0; equals one if the number of full-time employees is between 1 and 4; equals two if the number of full-time employees is between 5 and 19; equals three if the number of full-time employees is between 20 and 99; equals four if the number of full-time employees is between 100 and 499.
Firm Age	The number of years a firm is established.
Education	A categorical variable which equals one if the owner/manager of the firm has a high school diploma; equals two if the owner/manager of the firm has a college/CEGEP/trade school diploma; equals three if the owner/manager of the firm has a bachelor's degree; equals four if the owner/manager of the firm has a master's degree or above.
Business Experiences	A categorical variable which equals zero if the owner/manager has no experience in business management; equals one if the number of years of experience is between 1 and 5; equals two if the number of years of experience is between 5 and 10; equals three if the number of years of experience is between 10 and 20; equals four if the number of years of experience is greater than 20.
Retail	A dummy variable which equals one if the firm belongs to the retail sector, and zero otherwise.
Ontario	A dummy variable which equals one if the firm is in Ontario, and zero otherwise.
British Columbia	A dummy variable which equals one if the firm is in British Columbia, and zero otherwise.

Note: All the variables reported in the data analysis were announced in the fiscal year 2017.

Education is measured by the diploma/degree the owner/manager of the business has achieved. The previous study suggested that owners' education highly influences firms' growth and financial performance (Brush & Hisrich, 1991; Virglerova et al., 2017).

Business Experience is measured by the number of years of relevant business experience the owner/manager has. The previous study suggested that owners with relevant experiences in the same field are more likely to expand their business (Brush & Hisrich, 1991; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977).

Retail is a dummy variable that equals one if the firm is in the retail sector (retail trade) and zero otherwise.

Brache and Felzensztein (2019) outlined that measuring the impact of firms' geographical location is important when exporting. However, due to the limited number of provinces, we specifically analyzed two major provinces. *Ontario* is a dummy variable that equals one if a firm is in Ontario, and *British Columbia* is a dummy variable that equals one if a firm is in British Columbia.

Statistical Methods

The multinomial logistic model is used to estimate the effects of the explanatory variables on export strategy (Kogut & Zander, 1992) since it can better describe the relationship between complex categorical variables (Abdul Hamid et al., 2018). Specifically, "export strategy" is the log odds of SME owners' decision to export directly, indirectly, or not.

Table 4 compares the mean and standard deviation of all the variables grouped as gender and immigrant ownership. The mean values from *Firm Age* indicate that SMEs owned by *Women-Non-Immigrant* have the oldest firms on average. The mean values from *Firm Size* indicate that SMEs owned by *Women Non-Immigrant* are the largest firms. Furthermore, the mean values from *Education* and *Business Experience* indicate that *Women Immigrant* business owners are the most educated, and *Women Non-Immigrant* business owners are the most experienced among all groups.

TABLE 2 Descriptive Statistics

	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Export Strategy	1									
2	Woman	−0.150	1								
3	Immigrant	−0.194	0.009	1							
4	Firm Age	−0.033	−0.141	−0.231	1						
5	Firm Size	−0.389*	0.408*	−0.062	0.311*	1					
6	Education	−0.151	0.025	0.082	−0.141	0.015	1				
7	Business Experiences	−0.407*	0.492*	−0.082	0.225	0.496*	0.054	1			
8	Retail	0.064	−0.142	0.014	0.062	−0.164	−0.188	−0.045	1		
9	Ontario	−0.002	0.232	−0.104	0.050	−0.050	0.020	0.117	0.097	1	
10	British Columbia	−0.105	−0.108	0.078	0.028	0.208	0.064	0.101	−0.266*	−0.570*	1
	Mean	1.98	0.50	0.49	20.35	2.50	3.12	1.74	0.20	0.45	0.28
	SD	0.86	0.50	0.50	33.80	1.41	1.05	1.20	0.40	0.50	0.45

Note(s): *N* = 109.
SD, standard deviation.
*Indicates the statistical significance at the level of 10%.

TABLE 3 Number of Observations on Export Strategy vs. Gender and Immigrant Ownership

Observations	Woman Immigrant	Man Immigrant	Woman Non-Immigrant	Man Non-Immigrant	Total
Direct Export	17 (63.0%)	12 (46.2%)	4 (14.3%)	8 (28.6%)	41 (37.6%)
Indirect Export	3 (11.1%)	2 (7.7%)	18 (64.3%)	6 (21.4%)	29 (26.6%)
Domestic	7 (25.9%)	12 (46.1%)	6 (21.4%)	14 (50.0%)	39 (35.8%)
Total (%)	27 (100%)	26 (100%)	28 (100%)	28 (100%)	109 (100%)

Note: *N* = 109; Percentage of export strategy in parentheses.

TABLE 4 Compare Mean and Standard Deviation of Key Variables by Gender and Immigrant Ownership

	Woman Immigrant	Man Immigrant	Woman Non-Immigrant	Man Non-Immigrant
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Firm Age	10.30 (7.71)	14.54 (13.58)	39.25 (58.17)	16.54 (20.98)
Firm Size	2.89 (1.28)	1.92 (1.20)	3.25 (1.27)	1.93 (1.44)
Education	3.33 (0.92)	3.08 (0.84)	2.96 (1.37)	3.11 (0.99)
Business Experiences	2.00 (1.24)	1.27 (1.00)	2.64 (0.87)	1.04 (1.00)
Retail	0.11 (0.32)	0.31 (0.47)	0.18 (0.39)	0.21 (0.42)
Ontario	0.52 (0.51)	0.27 (0.45)	0.61 (0.50)	0.39 (0.50)
British Columbia	0.26 (0.45)	0.38 (0.50)	0.21 (0.42)	0.29 (0.46)

Note: *N* = 109.
SD, standard deviation.

RESULTS

The regression analysis is based on two different empirical specifications. A multinomial logit regression analysis is conducted to gauge export strategy, particularly by computing the marginal effects on each strategy to measure how the export strategy varies when changing gender and immigrant status. Columns 1-3 in Tables 5 and 6 report the marginal effects on the likelihood of *Direct Export, Indirect Export*, and *Domestic*, respectively.

In regression model 1 (Table 5), the margin effect measures the probability of a particular change in export strategy based on gender and immigrant, respectively. In column 1, after controlling other variables, the effect of *Woman* on *Direct Export* is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.199$, $p<0.05$). With all other things being equal, the probability for SMEs to choose *Direct Export* is 19.9% lower for women-majority-owned SMEs as compared to men-majority-owned SMEs. Thus, the result supports Hypothesis 1, which states that women-majority-owned SMEs are less likely to export directly.

Model 1 also shows that the effect of *Immigrants* on *Direct Export* is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.290$, $p<0.01$). This suggests that when all other things are equal, SMEs' probability of choosing *Direct Export* will be 29.0% higher if immigrant-owned than non-immigrant-owned. Thus, Hypothesis 2, that SMEs owned by immigrants are more likely to export directly compared to SMEs owned by non-immigrants, is supported.

There are also some significant findings from the control variables in Table 5. The effects of *Firm Size* and *Business Experience* on both *Direct Export* and *Indirect Export* are positive and statistically significant, and the effect on *Direct Export* is more pronounced. These results indicate that large firms and more experienced owners are more likely to export directly. The effects of *Firm Size* and *Business Experience* on *Domestic* are negative and statistically significant. These results indicate that smaller firms and less experienced owners tend to remain in the domestic market. These results are consistent in Table 6.

To further explore the effects of gender and immigrant background, in regression model 2 (Table 6), we extend the regression analysis to compare other groups to *Woman Non-Immigrant* on export strategy particularly. In column 1, the effect of *Woman Immigrant* on *Direct Export* is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.501$, $p<0.01$), which means the probability for women immigrant-owned SMEs to choose *Direct Export* will be 50.1% higher than women non-immigrant-owned. Therefore, the result supports Hypothesis 3, that the negative effects of women-majority-owned SMEs' propensities to export directly are weaker when women owners have an immigrant background.

TABLE 5 Marginal Effects of Gender and Immigrant Background on Export Strategy: Result from Multinomial Logit Regression

Variables	Marginal Effect		
	Direct Export	Indirect Export	Domestic
Woman	−0.199** (0.090)	0.167** (0.083)	0.032 (0.089)
Immigrant	0.290*** (0.065)	−0.261*** (0.065)	−0.029 (0.077)
Firm Age	−0.001 (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.002)
Firm Size	0.069** (0.033)	0.019 (0.030)	−0.088*** (0.029)
Education	0.028 (0.038)	0.027 (0.030)	−0.055 (0.037)
Business Experiences	0.078** (0.0373)	0.033 (0.035)	−0.111*** (0.033)
Retail	−0.094 (0.105)	0.181** (0.091)	−0.087 (0.104)
Ontario	−0.031 (0.095)	0.084 (0.089)	−0.054 (0.090)
British Columbia	−0.113 (0.106)	0.121 (0.103)	−0.008 (0.107)
Log pseudo-likelihood	−81.003		
Wald chi-square	75.13		

Note(s): *N* = 109; standard errors in parentheses.
*** and ** indicate the statistical significance at the level of 1% and 5%, respectively.

TABLE 6 Marginal Effects of *Woman Immigrant* Background on Export Strategy: Result from Multinomial Logit Regression

Variables	Marginal Effect		
	Direct Export	Indirect Export	Domestic
Woman Immigrant	0.501*** (0.125)	−0.282*** (0.090)	−0.219 (0.142)
Man Immigrant	0.566*** (0.124)	−0.391*** (0.104)	−0.175 (0.137)
Man Non-Immigrant	0.413*** (0.138)	−0.204** (0.095)	−0.208 (0.137)
Firm Age	0.000 (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.002)
Firm Size	0.067** (0.032)	0.022 (0.029)	−0.089*** (0.029)
Education	0.018 (0.037)	0.031 (0.030)	−0.049 (0.036)
Business Experiences	0.096*** (0.036)	0.032 (0.034)	−0.128*** (0.035)
Retail	−0.071 (0.100)	0.166 (0.089)	−0.095 (0.103)
Ontario	−0.039 (0.093)	0.092 (0.089)	−0.053 (0.090)
British Columbia	−0.115 (0.102)	0.120 (0.103)	−0.004 (0.109)
Log pseudo-likelihood	−78.966		
Wald chi-square	79.21		

Note(s): N = 109; Standard errors in parentheses.
*** and ** indicate the statistical significance at the level of 1% and 5%, respectively.

Robustness Check

We also incorporate the interaction between gender and immigrant status and test the marginal interaction effect. The result shows that *Woman Non-Immigrant* is 32.63% less than other observations (including *Woman Immigrant*, *Man Immigrant*, and *Man Non-Immigrant*) to choose direct export. However, *Woman Immigrant* is 6.22% less than other observations (including *Woman Non-Immigrant*, *Man Immigrant*, and *Man Non-Immigrant*) to choose direct export. The results show that immigrant background increases the possibility that women-majority-owned firms export directly, which is consistent with the previous result.

DISCUSSION AND EXTENSION

The research on the relationship between the gender of business owners and SME internationalization is still at an early stage in the international entrepreneurial stream (Sui et al., 2022). Studies show that males predominate in immigrant entrepreneurship, and our knowledge of the factors that cause and explain the gender disparity is limited (Abbasian & Bildt, 2009). In this article, we have examined whether gender and immigrant status play a role in influencing the choice of Canadian SMEs to export directly, indirectly, or not export at all. More specifically, we investigated whether the gender effects depend on the immigrant status of owners. In doing so, we drew on the survey to get primary data from Canadian SMEs. We conducted a regression analysis and took social capital theory as the theoretical framework to examine the effects of gender and immigrant background on SMEs' export behavior and strategies. Our findings indicate that SMEs are less likely to favor direct versus indirect exporting when women owners lead them. Meanwhile, the evidence confirms that immigrant ownership has a significant positive effect on the likelihood of SMEs exporting directly compared to other export strategies, and women immigrant owners seem to benefit from their immigrant backgrounds. In other words, the status of "immigrant" weakens the negative effect of the status of "woman" regarding the choice of direct exporting. These findings and insights are consistent with our theoretical framework.

Contributions to the Theory

Our work contributes to the growing body of research on the role of gender in international business (Orser et al., 2010; Runyan et al., 2006; Welch et al., 2008). What is known about the effects of gender backgrounds on SMEs' export strategy is based on a notable study by Orser et al. (2010), which shows that gender is not an essential determinant of SME owners' export propensity. Based on a more fine-grained measure of exporting strategy, our study builds on and qualifies Orser et al. (2010) by showing that gender matters when the export strategy is divided into direct and indirect exports. Specifically, our study shows that women immigrant owners derive significant advantages from factors such as first-hand knowledge and pre-existing social ties in global markets.

Our work also supports the literature on the role of immigrants in international business (Dalziel, 2008; Herander & Saavedra, 2005; Hernandez, 2014; Morgan et al., 2018; White, 2009). One of the crucial insights from previous research is that SMEs with immigrant owners are more export-oriented than SMEs with non-immigrant owners (Neville et al., 2014; Sui et al., 2015). However, it does not consider the gender of business owners, thus is unclear whether women and men immigrant owners engage in exporting equally. Our research adds to this research area by suggesting that although men immigrant owners show a stronger tendency, both men and women owners benefit from their status as "immigrant" when accounting for direct exporting. It reinforces the argument that immigrant business owners have export-enabling attributes (Morgan et al., 2018; Neville et al., 2014; Sui et al., 2015), and is consistent with the literature on the link between business owners' characteristics and SMEs' export behavior (Barringer et al., 2005; Bloodgood et al., 1996; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Reuber & Fischer, 1997; Vandor & Franke, 2016).

Liberal feminist theory claims that women and men are not given identical opportunities (Ahl, 2006; Johnsen & McMahon, 2005). SMEs owned by women owners may perform poorer compared to their men counterparts because women face discrimination. Systemic barriers can make women less prepared than men when operating a business. For instance, women often have a limited chance to gain experience working in a firm's industry (DeTienne & Chandler, 2007; Fischer et al., 1993; Orser et al., 2010; Watson, 2010) and cannot penetrate business networks like men, thus affecting accessibility to helpful market information (Abor & Biekpe, 2006). Our research offers nuanced insights by suggesting that social structure differences and gender challenges might still exist between women and men in international trade and thus support the application of liberal feminist theory in international entrepreneurship (Cliff, 1998; Fasci & Valdez, 1998; Orser et al., 2010).

Practice and Policy Implications

A better understanding of industry practices and individual preferences is helpful to inform policy decisions (Pergelova et al., 2018). Our research shows that networking needs to be used as an export facilitation activity (Welch et al., 1998), especially for direct exporting. The findings can guide SME owners, managers, and policymakers tasked to assist them. Moreover, since some women entrepreneurs can operate export businesses successfully (Sui et al., 2022), government intervention can make a difference by removing lingering barriers that hold other women entrepreneurs back. This could involve export promotion programs that seek to improve women's participation in international markets. Furthermore, since strong international networks are critical for women entrepreneurs, policymakers should develop or take advantage of existing initiatives to encourage business owners to identify, build, and cultivate international business relationships and promote these initiatives to female entrepreneurs through effective channels.

Limitations and Future Research

In interpreting our research, some limitations should, of course, be kept in mind. One cannot generalize empirically from 109 observations, and the hypotheses developed in this article require further testing. We categorized the industry types into a dummy variable *Retail*, and we should be able to control more detailed industry classifications given larger representative samples and broader coverage of industry control variables (MacCallum et al., 1999). The location of this study is solely in Canada. Future research may build on our work by investigating other countries. Our study does not evaluate whether business owners' adopted export strategy leads to superior financial performance. Future research can address this gap by investigating systematic differences in the choices of women-owned SMEs and men-owned SMEs between direct and indirect exporting and the financial returns generated from each. Furthermore, our research does not consider the social–cultural context of immigrant entrepreneurs' export destinations. When immigrants might be able to take advantage of networks in their country of origin, the varied attitudes toward women's rights in different sites present challenges to women's international business exploring.

CONCLUSION

While existing literature argues over whether gender and immigrant background affect owners' export behavior, it is unclear how gender and immigrant background matter when the export strategy involves direct versus indirect export channels. This study extends the current discussion based on 109 Canadian SMEs' observations gained by the survey. We emphasize three findings: (1) women-majority-owned SMEs are less likely to export directly compared to men-majority-owned SMEs; (2) immigrant-owned SMEs are more likely to export directly compared to SMEs owned by non-immigrant counterparts; (3) the negative effects of women-majority ownership on direct export are weaker when women owners have an immigrant background. Theoretically, our research emphasizes the importance of access to international networks for a direct approach to exporting. It also suggests that owners with immigrant backgrounds overcome the networking barriers in the global market due to their rich social capital. Specifically, women immigrant owners seem to leverage a network-based advantage in the foreign market. More generally, our research extends international business theory by demonstrating that women business owners disproportionately turn to intermediaries when exporting, possibly because they lack access to networks that support direct exporting. However, women owners with immigrant backgrounds have the potential to overcome network-related barriers, thus weakening the negative effect of gender on direct exporting. In addition, it seems that business owners have carefully considered these alternative approaches to exporting, and their choices reflect their relative advantages or disadvantages. International business scholars and policymakers can draw on these insights to advance the theory and practice of women and immigrant entrepreneurship.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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