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THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITIES, DIGITALIZATION, AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT IN ENHANCING EXPORT COMPETITIVENESS: EVIDENCE FROM SMES IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play an increasingly important role in strengthening export capacity, diversifying international markets, and supporting sustainable economic development in Uzbekistan. The ability of SMEs to compete successfully in international markets depends not only on access to foreign markets but also on their organizational capabilities, adoption of digital technologies, innovation capacity, and access to government support. This study examines the role of organizational capabilities, digitalization, and government support in enhancing the export competitiveness of SMEs in Uzbekistan. The findings suggest that strengthening internal organizational capabilities and fostering an enabling institutional environment are particularly important for improving SME export performance. At the same time, digitalization can generate greater benefits when integrated with organizational transformation and government support rather than approached as a standalone technological investment. The study provides preliminary empirical evidence that contributes to the growing literature on SME export competitiveness in emerging economies and offers relevant policy implications for further strengthening SME internationalization and export performance in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: SMEs; export competitiveness; organizational capabilities; digitalization; government support; Uzbekistan; innovation; internationalization.

Аннотация. Малые и средние предприятия (МСП) играют всё более важную роль в укреплении экспортного потенциала, диверсификации международных рынков и обеспечении устойчивого экономического развития Узбекистана. Способность МСП успешно конкурировать на международных рынках зависит не только от доступа к зарубежным рынкам, но и от их организационного потенциала, внедрения цифровых технологий, инновационных возможностей и доступа к государственной поддержке. В настоящем исследовании рассматривается роль организационного потенциала, цифровизации и государственной поддержки в повышении экспортной конкурентоспособности МСП Узбекистана. Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о том, что укрепление внутреннего организационного потенциала и формирование благоприятной институциональной среды имеют особое значение для повышения экспортной результативности МСП. В то же время цифровизация может обеспечить более значительный эффект при её интеграции с организационными преобразованиями и мерами государственной поддержки, а не при её рассмотрении исключительно как самостоятельного технологического вложения. Исследование представляет предварительные эмпирические данные, дополняющие развивающуюся научную литературу по вопросам экспортной конкурентоспособности МСП в странах с формирующейся рыночной экономикой, а также формулирует актуальные практические рекомендации по дальнейшему укреплению интернационализации и экспортной деятельности МСП в Узбекистане.

Ключевые слова: малые и средние предприятия (МСП); экспортная конкурентоспособность; организационный потенциал; цифровизация; государственная поддержка; Узбекистан; инновации; интернационализация.

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play an important role in promoting economic growth, employment, innovation, and international trade. In emerging economies, they also contribute to production diversification, regional development, entrepreneurship, and integration into global value chains. Compared with larger firms, SMEs may have more limited access to financial resources, managerial capabilities, advanced technologies, market information, and international networks. Strengthening their export competitiveness therefore depends on the development of robust internal capabilities alongside supportive institutional conditions.

Export competitiveness is a multidimensional concept encompassing product quality, price competitiveness, innovation, marketing capabilities, human capital, knowledge, international networks, and adaptability to changing market conditions. Digital transformation has created additional opportunities for SMEs through e-commerce, digital marketing, online sales channels, information and communication technologies (ICT), and digital management tools. At the same time, the contribution of digital technologies to export performance can be further strengthened when their adoption is accompanied by appropriate organizational capabilities and an enabling institutional environment. Digitalization can therefore be viewed not merely as a technological investment but as an integral component of broader organizational development and internationalization.

Accordingly, this study examines three key determinants of SME export competitiveness in Uzbekistan: organizational capabilities, digitalization, and government support. By considering these factors together, the study seeks to provide a more integrated understanding of the conditions that can contribute to strengthening the international competitiveness and export performance of SMEs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Export competitiveness refers to a firm's ability to compete successfully in international markets through product quality, price competitiveness, innovation, customer relationships, and overall market performance. For SMEs, participation in export markets provides opportunities to expand beyond the domestic market, diversify revenue sources, and access new customers. At the same time, successful internationalization requires adequate financial resources, foreign-market knowledge, qualified personnel, regulatory awareness, and the capacity to meet international standards.

In this study, SME export competitiveness is assessed through several complementary dimensions: export growth, entry into new markets, product and price competitiveness, compliance with quality standards, relationships with foreign buyers, export profitability, overall competitiveness, and future export potential. This multidimensional approach makes it possible to capture both the current export performance of SMEs and their capacity for further international expansion.

The Resource-Based View suggests that sustainable competitive advantage depends on the development and effective use of valuable and difficult-to-imitate resources and capabilities. In the context of SMEs, such capabilities include innovation, employee skills, organizational learning, technology adoption, competitor analysis, and knowledge acquisition. These internal resources can strengthen firms' ability to identify international opportunities, respond to changing market conditions, and adapt their products and business practices to the requirements of foreign markets.

In the present study, organizational capabilities are measured through product and service innovation, employee innovation, technology adoption, competitor analysis, learning from foreign partners, the application of accumulated experience, and employee training. The mean score of 4.09 indicates a relatively strong level of organizational capabilities among the surveyed SMEs. This provides an empirical basis for examining whether stronger internal capabilities are associated with higher levels of export competitiveness.

H1: Organizational capabilities have a positive and significant effect on SME export competitiveness.

Digitalization can support SME internationalization by reducing transaction costs, improving access to market information, strengthening communication with customers and business partners, and expanding opportunities to participate in e-commerce and online markets. Digital marketing and information and communication technologies (ICT) can further enhance market visibility, operational efficiency, and firms' ability to reach customers across geographical boundaries.

In this study, digitalization is measured through the adoption of digital business processes, e-commerce, online sales, digital marketing, and ICT efficiency. Digital marketing and ICT received relatively high assessments

among the surveyed SMEs, while e-commerce and online sales recorded more moderate evaluations. These findings suggest that SMEs have established a meaningful foundation for digital transformation, with additional opportunities to expand the use of e-commerce and online sales channels as part of their internationalization strategies.

H2: Digitalization has a positive and significant effect on SME export competitiveness.

Government support can contribute to SME export competitiveness by facilitating access to export promotion services, efficient customs procedures, financial assistance, training, certification, market information, and supporting infrastructure. Such measures can strengthen the institutional environment for SME internationalization and assist firms in developing the capabilities required to participate effectively in international markets.

In this study, government support is primarily reflected in respondents' perceptions of the efficiency of customs procedures, with a mean score of approximately 3.67. This assessment indicates a generally positive perception while also suggesting opportunities for the continued enhancement of institutional support mechanisms for exporting SMEs.

Effective government support may also facilitate digital transformation by improving access to infrastructure, finance, training, and export-related information. These mechanisms can complement firms' internal resources and strengthen their capacity to apply digital technologies effectively in international business activities.

H3: Government support has a positive and significant effect on SME export competitiveness.

In addition to its direct contribution to export competitiveness, government support may strengthen the benefits associated with SME digitalization. Access to appropriate infrastructure, financial resources, training, market information, and supportive institutional conditions can enhance firms' ability to translate digital technology adoption into improved international market performance.

From this perspective, government support can be considered both a direct determinant of export competitiveness and a potential moderating factor in the relationship between digitalization and export performance. SMEs operating within a supportive institutional environment may be better positioned to convert investments in digital technologies into market access, customer engagement, operational efficiency, and export-related outcomes.

H4: Government support strengthens the positive relationship between digitalization and SME export competitiveness.

Theoretical Framework. This study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives to explain the determinants of SME export competitiveness.

First, the Resource-Based View (RBV) explains how firms can develop competitive advantage through the effective use of internal resources and organizational capabilities. In the context of SMEs, this perspective highlights the importance of firm-specific resources, knowledge, skills, innovation capacity, and organizational competencies in strengthening competitiveness in international markets.

Second, Dynamic Capabilities Theory emphasizes firms' ability to adapt, learn, innovate, and reconfigure their resources and capabilities in response to changing market conditions. This perspective is particularly relevant to SME internationalization, as successful participation in foreign markets requires firms to respond effectively to evolving customer preferences, technological developments, competitive conditions, and emerging market opportunities.

Third, Institutional Theory highlights the role of the external institutional environment in shaping firms' business and internationalization activities. In this study, the institutional environment encompasses government policies, regulatory frameworks, customs procedures, and support mechanisms that can facilitate SME participation in international markets and contribute to the development of their export capabilities.

The integration of these three theoretical perspectives is particularly appropriate for analysing SMEs in Uzbekistan because export competitiveness is likely to be shaped by the interaction between firm-level capabilities and the broader institutional environment. The Resource-Based View explains the importance of internal organizational resources and capabilities; Dynamic Capabilities Theory captures firms' capacity to adapt and transform these resources in response to changing international market conditions; and Institutional Theory explains how supportive external conditions can facilitate these processes. Together, these perspectives provide an integrated theoretical foundation for examining the effects of organizational capabilities, digitalization, and government support on SME export competitiveness (Figure 1).

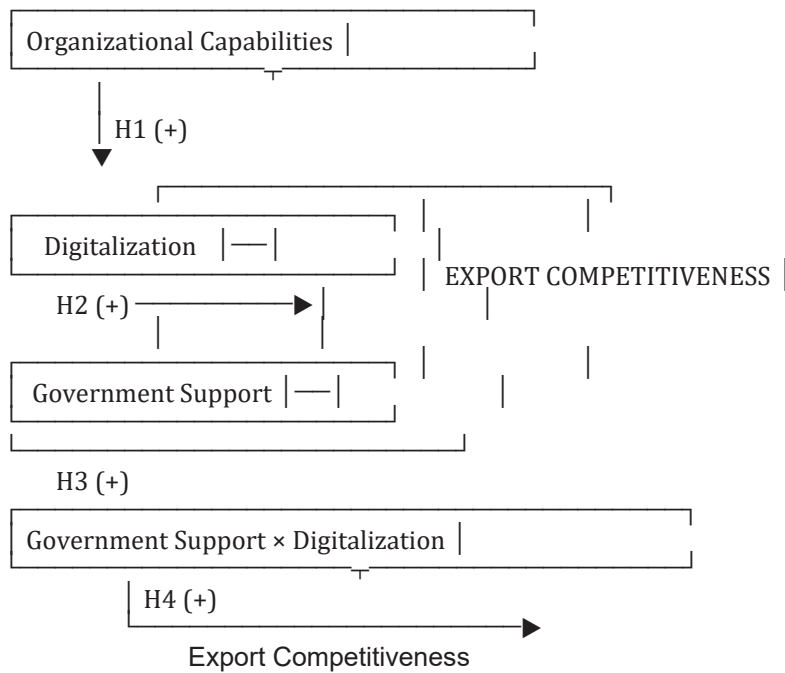


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework¹

The conceptual framework assumes that organizational capabilities and digitalization represent important internal drivers of competitiveness, while government support represents an external institutional factor.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research design based on structured survey data collected from SMEs engaged in export-oriented activities in Uzbekistan.

A structured questionnaire was developed using a five-point Likert scale, with responses coded as follows:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

The empirical analysis presented in this study is based on 24 valid respondent observations.

Given that the current dataset represents an initial sample, the findings are interpreted as preliminary empirical evidence and provide an exploratory basis for understanding the relationships examined in the study. Further research based on a broader sample could build upon these findings and provide additional evidence regarding the wider population of SMEs in Uzbekistan.

The questionnaire items were grouped into four analytical constructs (Table 1).

Table 1
Measurement of Variables²

Construct	Items	Measurement
Government Support	Q11	Customs/export procedures facilitate export operations
Digitalization	Q12–Q16	Digital business processes, e-commerce, online platforms, digital marketing and ICT
Organizational Capabilities	Q17–Q24	Innovation, learning, technology adoption, competitor analysis and employee development
Export Competitiveness	Q25–Q33	Export growth, market expansion, quality, price, profitability, buyer relationships and competitiveness

Note: The constructs were calculated as the mean of their corresponding questionnaire items.

¹ Author's development

² Author's development

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The descriptive results indicate generally positive assessments across the main constructs examined in the study (Table 2).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics³

Variable	Mean	SD
Government Support	3.67	1.05
Digitalization	3.58	1.03
Organizational Capabilities	4.09	0.66
Export Competitiveness	4.03	0.69

Organizational capabilities recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.09$), followed by export competitiveness ($M = 4.03$). Government support ($M = 3.67$) and digitalization ($M = 3.58$) also received generally positive assessments, while indicating additional opportunities for further strengthening institutional facilitation and the integration of digital technologies into SME activities.

Respondents reported particularly positive assessments of innovation, cooperation with foreign partners, employee development, digital marketing, and ICT efficiency. E-commerce and online sales platform adoption received comparatively more moderate assessments. These findings suggest that SMEs increasingly recognise the value of digital technologies and have established a foundation for digital transformation, with further opportunities to expand the integration of e-commerce and online sales channels into their export activities (Table 3).

Table 3
Reliability Analysis⁴

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Assessment
Digitalization	5	0.848	Good
Organizational Capabilities	8	0.879	Good
Export Competitiveness	9	0.906	Excellent

Note: All Cronbach's alpha values exceed 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency and satisfactory reliability of the measurement scales.

The reliability analysis demonstrates that the three multi-item constructs exhibit strong internal consistency. Export competitiveness records the highest Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.906$), followed by organizational capabilities ($\alpha = 0.879$) and digitalization ($\alpha = 0.848$). These results provide an appropriate basis for using the corresponding composite measures in the subsequent correlation and regression analyses (Table 4).

Table 4
Correlation Analysis⁵

Variable	GS	DIG	OC	EC
Government Support (GS)	1.000	0.791	0.368	0.601
Digitalization (DIG)	0.791	1.000	0.335	0.405
Organizational Capabilities (OC)	0.368	0.335	1.000	0.607
Export Competitiveness (EC)	0.601	0.405	0.607	1.000

All explanatory variables show positive bivariate correlations with export competitiveness. Organizational capabilities demonstrate the strongest association with export competitiveness ($r = 0.607$), closely followed

³ Author's development

⁴ Author's development

⁵ Author's development

by government support ($r = 0.601$), while digitalization also shows a positive association ($r = 0.405$). The relatively strong correlation between government support and digitalization ($r = 0.791$) suggests that supportive institutional conditions and digital adoption may develop in a closely interconnected manner.

To examine the independent contribution of the explanatory variables to export competitiveness, the following multiple regression model was estimated:

$$[EC = \beta_0 + \beta_1 OC + \beta_2 DIG + \beta_3 GS + \varepsilon]$$

where EC represents export competitiveness, OC represents organizational capabilities, DIG represents digitalization, GS represents government support, and ε denotes the error term (Table 5).

Table 5
Multiple Regression Analysis⁶

Independent Variable	β	p-value	Result
Organizational Capabilities	0.482	0.010	Significant
Government Support	0.410	0.021	Significant
Digitalization	-0.162	0.334	Not significant

$$[R^2 = 0.555; \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.489; F = 8.323; p < 0.001]$$

The regression model explains 55.5% of the observed variation in export competitiveness ($R^2 = 0.555$), while the adjusted coefficient of determination is 0.489. The overall model is statistically significant ($F = 8.323$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the explanatory variables jointly provide meaningful explanatory power for export competitiveness within the preliminary sample.

Organizational capabilities demonstrate the strongest positive and statistically significant effect on export competitiveness ($\beta = 0.482$, $p = 0.010$), providing empirical support for H1. This result highlights the importance of innovation, organizational learning, employee development, technology adoption, and knowledge acquisition in strengthening the export competitiveness of SMEs.

Government support also demonstrates a positive and statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.410$, $p = 0.021$), providing empirical support for H3. The result suggests that supportive institutional conditions can make an important contribution to SME export competitiveness and complement the internal capabilities of firms.

Digitalization does not demonstrate a statistically significant independent effect in the multivariate model ($\beta = -0.162$, $p = 0.334$); consequently, H2 is not empirically confirmed within the current preliminary sample. This result should be interpreted together with the positive bivariate correlation between digitalization and export competitiveness ($r = 0.405$). The combination of these findings suggests that digitalization is positively associated with export competitiveness at the bivariate level, while its independent contribution becomes less distinct when organizational capabilities and government support are considered simultaneously.

The change in the direction of the digitalization coefficient may be associated with the relatively strong correlation between digitalization and government support ($r = 0.791$). This pattern suggests potential overlap in the explanatory information captured by these variables and indicates that the contribution of digitalization may operate partly in conjunction with supportive institutional conditions. Given the preliminary nature and size of the sample, this relationship should be interpreted cautiously and examined further using a broader dataset (Table 6).

Table 6
Hypothesis Testing⁷

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H1	Organizational Capabilities → Export Competitiveness	Supported
H2	Digitalization → Export Competitiveness	Not supported
H3	Government Support → Export Competitiveness	Supported
H4	Government Support × Digitalization → Export Competitiveness	Requires further testing

⁶ Author's development

⁷ Author's development

Overall, the preliminary results highlight the important contribution of organizational capabilities and government support to strengthening SME export competitiveness, while also indicating opportunities for further investigation into the role of digitalization using a broader sample.

The empirical findings provide several important insights into the determinants of SME export competitiveness in Uzbekistan.

First, organizational capabilities emerge as the strongest predictor of export competitiveness ($\beta = 0.482$; $r = 0.607$). This finding is consistent with the Resource-Based View, which emphasizes the role of valuable and difficult-to-imitate organizational resources and capabilities in creating competitive advantage. For SMEs in Uzbekistan, particularly relevant capabilities include innovation, employee development, learning from foreign partners, competitor analysis, and technology adoption. The relatively high mean score ($M = 4.09$) further demonstrates the importance attributed to these capabilities by the surveyed SMEs.

Second, government support demonstrates a significant positive relationship with export competitiveness ($\beta = 0.410$; $r = 0.601$). This finding highlights the contribution of a supportive institutional environment, including financial, regulatory, informational, and other relevant support mechanisms, to strengthening the international competitiveness of SMEs operating in emerging markets.

Third, the contribution of digitalization to export competitiveness appears to depend on its effective integration with broader organizational and institutional capabilities. Although surveyed firms report relatively strong use of digital marketing and ICT, the adoption of e-commerce and online sales channels received more moderate assessments. These findings suggest that SMEs in Uzbekistan are progressing through an important stage of digital transformation, with growing digital awareness and further opportunities to integrate digital technologies more extensively into export-related processes.

Finally, the strong relationship between digitalization and government support ($r = 0.791$) suggests that the benefits associated with digital transformation may be strengthened when technological adoption is complemented by supportive institutional conditions, skilled employees, managerial capabilities, and appropriate infrastructure. This finding reinforces the importance of considering digitalization as part of a broader organizational and institutional ecosystem rather than solely as an independent technological factor.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the effects of organizational capabilities, digitalization, and government support on the export competitiveness of SMEs in Uzbekistan. Based on survey data from 24 respondents, the findings highlight organizational capabilities and government support as particularly important factors associated with SME export competitiveness.

Organizational capabilities demonstrated the strongest positive relationship with export competitiveness ($r = 0.607$; $\beta = 0.482$), followed closely by government support ($r = 0.601$; $\beta = 0.410$). Digitalization was also positively correlated with export competitiveness ($r = 0.405$); however, its independent effect was not statistically significant in the multivariate regression model within the current preliminary sample. This finding suggests that the contribution of digitalization may become more evident when it is effectively integrated with broader organizational capabilities and supportive institutional conditions.

The regression model explained 55.5% of the variation in export competitiveness ($R^2 = 0.555$), demonstrating the relevance of an integrated framework that considers organizational, digital, and institutional factors together. The results further indicate that strengthening internal capabilities and maintaining a supportive institutional environment can play an important role in enhancing the international competitiveness of SMEs.

Overall, the findings suggest that SMEs in Uzbekistan can further strengthen their export competitiveness by prioritizing the development of organizational capabilities while integrating digital transformation with employee skills, innovation, international learning, and available government support mechanisms. Such an integrated approach can contribute to the continued development of SME internationalization and support their effective participation in international markets.

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