



International Journal of Applied Business and Economic Research

ISSN : 0972-7302

available at <http://www.serialsjournal.com>

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Volume 15 • Number 10 • 2017

Export Challenges to MSMEs: A Case Study of Indian Handicraft Industry

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Abstract: The study aims to explore the various challenges experienced by the micro, small and medium sized exporting firms of a traditional handicraft industry in an emerging economy context. The prime objective of the research is to suggest the business community and the policy makers how to overcome/minimize the challenges to export and smoothen the process of internationalization of the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the global marketplace. The research reveals that small business entrepreneurs undergo number of obstacles in the way to become committed exporters. A total of two hundred ten exporters from the micro, small and medium sized firms participated in the study and their perceived responses were recorded through a Likert scale based semi-structured questionnaire survey. Some policy based recommendations are made on the basis of results for a better performance by the Indian MSMEs in the international export market.

Key words: Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), export challenges, handicrafts, policy, emerging economy, etc.

INTRODUCTION

As the time spins off witnessing the era of globalization with an increased acceptance of the business model of capitalism throughout the world, including the post-Soviet bloc countries like Eastern European countries, there awaits a tremendous potential for the firms going outside their local boundaries and looking for broader international market horizons. Countries are now focused on increasing and promoting international business, developing regional integrations by allowing free flow of goods and services among the member countries, etc. because of the scope of international business.

Transforming the scope of trade from a local to an international emphasis is one of the main changes in modern times (Leonidou, 2004). But the literature also supports the fact that all the firms are not able to initiate and sustain in the international markets. Currently, for small sized firms export strategy is considered as one of the most common entry modes to participate in international business (Lado, Martínez-Ros, &

Valenzuela, 2001) and a prominent feature of the global economy related to the expanded mobility of goods, services, information, capital, and labor, across national and regional frontiers (Leonidou, 2004). This is closely linked to the development of communication technologies that have made the world a small global village, which in turn has led to the formulation of new trade regulations and laws designed to trim down and mitigate traditional trade obstacles and barriers in both developed and developing countries (Borensztein, De Gregorio, & Lee, 1998). It is suggested that developed and developing economies, have realized the important role that small & medium enterprises (SMEs) have in the move towards efficient international trade (Hill, Nancarrow, & Wright, 2002). SMEs play a gradually important role in global economics (Hill *et al.*, 2002). Carson, Cromie, McGowan and Hill (1995) found out that over the past 20 years, SMEs have been recognized by most countries as a significant contributor to an economy in form of job and wealth creation. Moreover, SMEs has a significant contribution to the economic development of nations and are considered to be their manufacturing backbone due to their ability to generate jobs with minimum cost and innovation (Cheng, 2006; Ghouse, 2014)). In support of this, Neupent, Baughn and Dao (2006) show that SME's represent one of the fastest growing segments in the economy of various countries. Thus, there is a growing understanding of the importance of assisting SMEs acknowledging their contribution to job creation, development of new products & services and an encouragement to entrepreneurial culture (Crick, Al Obaidi, & Chaudhry, 1998).

Direct exporting is the most widely recognized form of international business for small and medium enterprises. It is observed from extant literature that some small and medium-sized firms' managers have psychological/mental barriers to foreign operations, while some managers experience challenges in form of limited amount of resources and facilities to implement their proactive strategy of exploring the overseas market. The governments of different countries play an important role in reducing the trade barriers and develop domestic firms' competencies to play internationally. Many researchers have independently examined the trade barriers in the export which play a crucial role to the business community and the policy makers in formulating their policies to promote exports. The research on export challenges/obstacles has been widely performed in western context as compared to the research in an emerging economy context, like Indian micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

This exploratory research investigates the perceived challenges to export by the managers in the Indian MSMEs and their responsiveness and attitudes toward export aiding programs by the government to promote internationalization of the micro, small and medium sized export oriented firms in the international market place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The perception of export oriented problems varies with the status of the exporters, i.e., if the exporters are active or passive (Sharkey, Lim, & Kim, 1989). Export problems are the gaps which need to be filled by the competitive producer to become a successful exporter. Previous research relates a variety of types of barriers makes an impact on the exporters' strategic decisions on the deployment of the firm's resources and commitment to exporting (Duarte Alonso, Bressan, O'shea, & Krajsic, 2014; Kahiya *et al.*, 2014; Kahiya & Dean, 2016; Katsikeas, Leonidou, & Morgan, 2000; Shoham & Albaum, 1995). Duarte Alonso *et al.* (2014) conducted a research on small exporters and found that currency exchange, market entry barriers and trust are the most important challenges to them. Arteaga-Ortiz and Fernández Ortiz (2010) classified

the exporting barriers under four heads, namely, knowledge, resources, procedure and exogenous barriers. A few research studies also highlight that quality control and safety standards as important challenges to the exporters, persuading the firms to develop the products as per the requirements of the different overseas markets (Ah Keng & Soo Juan, 1989; Kedia & Chhokar, 1986). Acs, Morck, Shaver, and Yeung (1997) in their study argued that SMEs face two internationalization challenges in form of property rights protection and barriers to entry. Dhanaraj and Beamish (2003) performed a study on the performance of U.S. and Canadian small and medium-sized exporters and proposed a parsimonious model incorporating the resource-based theory of the firm, with three sets of resources as the firm size, enterprise, and technological intensity which are good predictors of the export strategy of a firm.

The export barriers, or the challenges experienced in exports refer to all those problems of an enterprise capability to initiate, to grow, or to endure the business processes in the overseas markets. These export barriers develop uncertainty among the managers in small & medium sized firms about the exports, develops a negative attitude among the many exporters which leads to the inefficient performance of the exporters (Leonidou, 2004; Katsikeas & Leonidou 1996). The perceptions of the managers to the exporting barriers are under research consideration from the 1960s in diverse outlooks. On the basis of the classification proposed by Leonidou (1995), Morgan (1997), the export barriers can be categorized as:

- 1) *internal barriers* (domestic & overseas markets),
- 2) *external barriers* (domestic & overseas markets), and
- 3) *exporting barriers*.

Later, after doing a review of thirty-two (32) research studies conducted during the period of 1960-2000, Leonidou (2004) has classified thirty-nine 39 export barriers into three broad groups, *internal group* (functional, marketing & informational) and four barriers as *external* (procedural, task, governmental & business environment related) groups that are observed contrarily by *non-export firms*, *current export firms* and *ex-export firms*. Managers' experiences and involvement in export activities have a direct impact on their perceptions towards several export barriers (Morgan & Katsikeas, 1994; Souter & Ramaseshan 1996). Also, *manager related factors* (less skilled, risk-averse and introvert managers), *organizational factors* (like experience & the capacity of a firm) and *business environment related factors* (economic, political and socio-cultural in the domestic and the foreign market) somewhat effects the managerial perceptions regarding the barriers to export (Koeglmayr, Dichtl and Mueller, 1990; Morgan & Katsikeas, 1994; Leonidou, 1995, 2004).

In one of the studies conducted by the Organization of Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) conducted a study in the year 2009, and listed the barriers to SME internationalization, which proposed the following ten barriers as the most prominent barriers related to SMEs internationalization -

- a) Shortage of funds, i.e., the working capital to finance the export activity;
- b) Non-pre-emptive, i.e., not able to identifying international business opportunities;
- c) Lack of information to uncover foreign markets;
- d) Improper liaison/communication with the potential foreign customers
- e) Ineffective/non-reliable representation in foreign markets;
- f) Inefficient managerial concern & response to internationalization;
- g) Shortage of skilled professionals for export operations;

- h) Inability to match competitors' pricing;
- i) Insufficient parent government export assistance/incentives, and
- j) High costs in transportation/value chain.

In another study conducted by OECD in 2012, the barriers to small and medium enterprises' entry to foreign markets could be allocated in two broad classes as internal and external export barriers. Internal barriers are located in the internal environment of the firm while the external barriers are positioned in the external environment. The export performance in the small & medium sized firms experiences several difficulties, especially in the developing countries. The managerial skills and leadership play an important role in securing trained & skilled employees to establish and operate the exports. Incapability to safeguard the process of export strategy(s) has a greater impact towards the export performance of an export oriented firm. (Wignaraja, 2003). The geographic remoteness between the two countries involved in a business activity is an important export barrier which could possibly be a cause of problem(s). Technical issues resulting in export delay and interruptions can lead to customer's discontent (Köksal & Kettaneh, 2011). The export barriers may occur in the early phases of internationalization or during the process of developing long term relationships in the international market (Rundh, 2001).

The small & medium sized companies in the developing economies with higher adeptness of learning the export process witnessed substantial export growth. Contrarily, small firms with weak learning progression on the export front exhibited a low performance in the exports. Also, it is crucial for the small and medium sized firms in the developing countries to have an access to novel technology, market research, skills and the capital. Lacking such resources could deprive the small enterprises to connect with the overseas buyers and to get an access to their markets and the resources (Wignaraja, 2003).

In a study on Latin American SMEs, Cardoza *et al.* (2015) found that firms which are related to larger institutions are supposed to move internationally more quickly. Their research revealed that SMEs in Latin America mainly come across the barriers which are related to domestic regulations, economic environment and meagre information about the market demand in the foreign markets. Cahen, Lahiri, and Borini (2016) in their study on the Brazilian new technology-based firms (NTBFs) identified three important barriers, one of them macro as external institutional barrier and two micro level barriers as internal organizational capability barrier and human resource barrier. There are some qualitative characteristics of the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating within a territory which might be crucial to explain macroeconomic impact of the characteristics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study is based on the exporters' own understanding and perceptions with regards to different export challenges and their expectations from their export ventures in the traditional handicraft industry. The main objective of the study is to comprehend the experience of the exporters in their business and what expectations they make out through that experience for various problems, challenges, barriers, etc. to the policy makers in promoting the culturally intensive handicraft exports from an emerging market India, and the overall impact the export challenges/barriers create on the export performance of the micro, small and medium enterprises.

A questionnaire with structured and unstructured questions based on available literature was administered so that the participants highlighting the important concerns and issues in exports. The

unstructured questions encouraged the participants to provide feedback and information based on their experiences in export which was not covered by the structured questions. The final respondents included either owners of the micro, small or medium enterprises or the senior managers who were involved in managing exports in the micro, small and medium sized firms. The survey was carried out in three phases during the spring and the fall international export fairs organized by the Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH) at the Expo-Mart, Greater Noida, India in 2015-16 where exporters from various parts of the country assemble to showcase their different product categories to the foreign buyers.

The whole study was organized in the three stages. It commenced with a pilot study which was conducted on the owners of 10 local micro and small export oriented enterprises to check the reliability of the tool for the right response(s) from the survey. Stage two involved shortlisting of the micro, small and medium sized exporters from the export promotion council fair directories which were made available by personal contacts, also available online on EPCH website. Exporters with a permanent establishment at the Expomart were preferred so that they can be approached after the fair(s) also if the meeting couldn't take place during the busy schedule at the fair time. A total of 800 participating exporters were shortlisted. An initial contact was made on the phone and informing them about the study with a request for a meeting. The guarantee of anonymity of a participant's information was given because of the trade constraints. Finally, 210 exporters gave their consent to participate in the survey which was around 26 percent of the total population. The survey was the third and the last stage of the study in which the exporters responded to the questions related to the products, export markets, sales and the perceived barriers to export based on their experiences.

Data analysis was carried out once all the responses were received and recorded. The responses were analyzed through the percentage method and the mean scores of the responses on a 3 and 5 point Likert scale according to the type of questions. The variance was measured by the standard deviation. Data was reviewed incessantly mainly in the light of any additional information in a more illuminating configuration. Findings are summarized and interpreted below incorporating the quantitative and the qualitative responses recorded well contrasted with the extant literature review.

RESULTS

The results of the study are tabulated and discussed as below:

Table 1
Technical details of the study

<i>Sector of study</i>	<i>Micro, Small & Medium enterprises</i>
Industry type	Handicrafts/Home Furnishing
Region of study	India
Research instrument	Semi structured questionnaire
Sampling type	Random
Population size	800
Sample size	210
Level of analysis	Enterprise level
Statistical Analysis	SPSS 18
Period of study	October 2015-February 2016

(Table 1). The sector considered for the study was micro, small and medium enterprises into exports from the handicrafts/ home furnishing industry. The survey was done in the NCR based Expomart through a semi-structured questionnaire based on random sampling of a population size of 800 exporters. The enterprise level analysis of the results was made on SPSS-18 software.

Table 2
Export Markets of the MSMEs

<i>Countries</i>	<i>No. of operating enterprises</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
United Kingdom	165	78.57
France	147	70.00
Germany	156	74.28
The Netherlands	135	64.28
Japan	86	40.95
Australia	146	69.52
USA	183	87.14
Latin America	67	31.90
Others	82	39.04

(Table 2). The data shows the biggest export market of Indian handicrafts is the USA as the 87 percent exporters trade with American buyers followed by United Kingdom at 78 percent, Germany 74 percent, France at 70 percent, Australia at 69 percent, the Netherlands at 64 percent, Japan at 40 per cent, Latin American countries 32 percent while the handicraft exports of Indian MSMEs to other countries in the world stood at 39 percent.

Table 3
Sales methods firms choose

<i>Options</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Direct export sales	166	3.97	1.05
Reaching customers in expositions	73	2.58	1.14
Marketing intermediaries	68	2.67	1.58
Via retailers	41	2.03	1.66
Personal contacts and visits	178	4.17	1.96

(Table 3). Most of the exporters prefer to sell to the customers which they acquire through foreign business development visits at a mean score of 4.17 followed closely by direct export sales at score of 3.97. Export sales made through marketing intermediaries like buying agencies was at the mean score of 2.67 and the sales to the foreign buyers through export fairs worldwide measured a mean score of 2.58. The mean score for the exporters selling to the retailers was at 2.03 percent among the micro, small and medium sized handicraft exporters.

Table 4
Competition status of MSMEs in international markets

<i>Options</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Profit margin	158	3.09	0.90
Volume order	150	3.91	1.13
Product assortment	128	3.55	1.85
Marketing Strategy	144	3.83	1.32
Infrastructure	182	4.07	1.96

(Table 4). The table shows the data in form of competition status of the micro, small and medium enterprises with competing countries in the international markets. Parameters like marketing strategy, product range, order volume, profit margin and infrastructure were used to assess the status of Indian MSMEs among the competing countries on a 3-point Likert scale. The mean score of 4.07 for the lack of infrastructure was the highest concern for the competing Indian exporters in international market followed by order volumes/frequency from the foreign buyers at 3.91 mean score. Lack of proper marketing strategy for specific export markets at 3.83 mean score while the product assortment/range available as compared to competing exporters from exporting countries at 3.55 mean score. The difference in the product margins of the export products comparatively from other exporting countries at 3.09 mean score.

(Table 5). The data shows the result of the perceived challenges to exports in the micro, small and medium enterprises. Various export related problems related to export documentation, export market based demand, export value chain related, regulatory policy uncertainty, infrastructure related problems, technology & tools in manufacturing, exchange rates, market awareness & export promotion, export related subsidies, research & development, geopolitics, HRD related, psychic distance and inadequate social capital resources were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert Scale by the export managers of the micro, small and medium enterprises.

Table 5
Problem associated with export oriented enterprises

<i>Options</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Export documentation related	173	2.35	1.29
Product demand in export market	158	1.85	0.85
Export value chain related	129	1.63	1.26
Regulatory policy uncertainty	183	3.54	1.66
Infrastructure related problems	191	3.92	1.92
Technology & tools	176	2.69	0.91
Exchange rates	174	2.84	1.58
Market awareness & export promotion	196	3.85	2.06
Export related subsidies	188	4.05	1.36
Research & development	175	1.96	1.71
Geopolitics	171	2.88	1.66
HRD related	180	2.53	1.37
Psychic distance	173	3.64	1.22
Social capital resources	189	3.69	1.39

The results show that the biggest challenge to the exporters is the export subsidies provided with the government to promote the exports from the small and medium enterprises at 4.05 mean score. The second biggest challenge to the MSMEs is related to infrastructure related problems at a mean score 3.92 followed closely by market awareness and export promotion problems at 3.85 mean score. Challenges resulting from inadequate social capital resources is perceived as an obstacle to the MSMEs at a mean score of 3.69 while the psychic distance seemed to be an export challenge at 3.64 score. Uncertainty in the regulatory policies is also an obstacle to the export growth at a score of 3.54 while challenges like geopolitics, exchange rates, technology and tools, HRD related, export documentation related, research & development, demand in export market and export value chain related also pose to create barriers in export growth.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study show that the micro, small and medium enterprises are exposed to multiple export challenges with varying magnitudes. Our findings corroborate with the results of previous studies in this research area (Keupp & Gassman, 2009; Ruzzier *et al.*, 2006). Some of the problems associated with the exports macroscopic in nature, like the low export subsidies, infrastructure related problems, market awareness and export promotion, inadequate social capital resources, psychic distance, uncertainty in regulatory policy and some export oriented problems are microscopic in nature like geopolitics, exchange rates, technology and tools, HRD related, export documentation related, research & development, product demand in export market and problems related to the export value chain in the micro, small and medium enterprises. The microscopic problems, most of which are internal in nature, are controllable and easier to manage as compared to the macroscopic problems which are external in nature (Leonidou, 2004). Some of the problems associated with the exporting MSMEs vary with time and the industry context in the international business environment.

Export related subsidies are crucial to the micro, small and medium sized exporters as the tough competition in terms of price from east Asian competitors is the biggest challenge to the micro, small and medium sized exporters. The competitors enjoy higher subsidy packages from their respective governments as compared to Indian MSMEs. Infrastructure related problems like the factory set-up, capacity, remoteness to ports, accessibility to the export destination, lack of warehouses in the foreign markets, etc. pose serious challenge to the Indian small and medium sized exporters as compared to their East Asian counterparts, mainly the Chinese handicraft exporters. Low awareness about the new export markets is a critical issue among the micro and small sized exporters as they fell short of specific market information due to lack of export promotion and business development exercises. Export promotion is also minimal because of limited amount of funds and lack of information about the export markets. Most of the small and medium sized exporters prefer to develop their business through personal contacts and visits to the export markets. The US seems to be a highly lucrative market for the Indian handicrafts because of the high acceptability of the handmade crafts among the American multi-cultural customers. As per Johanson and Vahlne (1977), small firms give emphasis to psychic distance and began their internationalization process by choosing markets that fulfil the criterion. The main export markets of the micro, small and medium sized exporters are the US, the UK, Germany and France which they think are low in psychic distance while countries like Japan, Latin American countries like Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, etc. are small exports markets because of the high psychic distance associated with these regions in terms of language and culture (Johanson & Wiedershem-Paul, 1975).

Social capital resources such as networks, informal connections, inter-firm relationships and managerial connections are considered critical resource bases for international activities in small sized firms (Ellis, 2011; Pollard & Jemicz, 2010). The social capital is more valuable for a small sized exporting firm, as they often suffer from “liability of being small” and deal with the stress of international expansion and highly unpredictable business environment (Elg, Ghauri & Schaumann, 2015; Maolova *et al.*, 2010; Roxas, Lindsay, Ashill & Victorio, 2009). It was found that the micro and the small sized firms involved in handicraft exports were found to be lacking in the social capital resources.

Lack of management education, foreign language skills and exposure to foreign culture create barriers for the small and medium sized enterprises when involved in international business (Suarez-Ortega & Alamo-Vera, 2005). It is highly challenging for the micro and small enterprises to train the employees as the managers themselves are unlikely to comply with the qualifications and the requirements (Johnson, 2002).

The other problems related to the micro, small and medium sized exporters like the impact of geopolitics on export markets, fluctuations in the exchange rates of the currencies, research and new product development, product demand in the export markets, HRD related (human resource development), export value chain related also play a role in the export performance of these firms.

The public policy makers, especially the government should assist the micro, small and medium sized enterprises in reducing and barring these challenges to export, as their contribution to an economy is ample and are considered as a backbone of a national economy (Amini, 2004; Peters & Waterman, 1982) and contribute significantly to employment and innovation (Pavitt, Robson & Townsend, 1987). Vocational Training and short duration programs like workshops and specific circles focusing on export education (cultural intelligence, market awareness & research, etc.), functional (operational standards, skills, etc.) and promotion (export subsidies, consultancy, financial assistance, etc.) should be prepared for the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and implemented in various export oriented areas like clusters, free zones, etc. Emphasis should also be given in catering to the various infrastructural problems which is very crucial for the micro and small sized exporters to withstand and survive the competition at international level.

DIRECTION(S) FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The author suggests to draw the responses from a larger number of MSMEs from multiple industry sectors and located diversely in the country to get a better overview of the barriers/constraints to export performance among the small and medium enterprises. Another possibility is the use of mixed-methods that involves both qualitative and quantitative studies (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Creswell, 2013). The author also suggests for a comparative study among the export barriers of a developed country, an emerging economy and an under-developed country after which conclusions can be made on the factors effecting the export performance in different business environments which can be considered by the national policy makers for export promotion as well as for the multilateral institutions for drafting policies which can help significantly in increasing international business globally.

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