

# Factors influencing export performance amongst halal SMEs in Malaysia

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This research aims to identify the key factors that impact the export efficiency of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that produce halal products in Malaysia. The study delves into the relationships between factors, including human capital, managerial capability, Halal Assurance Management System (HAMS), digital transformation, government support, and networking capability, and how these factors contribute positively to the export performance of halal SMEs. Furthermore, the research explores the role of innovation capabilities as a moderator and how it affects the relationship between the independent variables and the competitive advantage of SMEs.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A quantitative approach will be employed in this study. It will involve conducting an online questionnaire survey. The survey will be distributed through emails and face-to-face interactions. The survey will be aimed at halal-certified SMEs. The SMEs will be registered on the JAKIM, MATRADE, and SME Corp Malaysia websites. Whether these SMEs engage in global business or not, they will be considered potential respondents. The statistical software Smart PLS will be utilized to analyze the data. The analysis will involve reliability, correlation, and regression analyses to achieve the research objectives.

**Practical implications:** This study is a significant contribution to business theory as it integrates the Resource Based View (RBV) theory and networking theory.

**Originality/value:** The study extends the RBV theory by including the HAMS variable. The research also examines the moderating role of innovation capabilities in the framework and competitive advantage as a mediator.

**Keywords:** Internationalization; Halal SMEs; competitive advantage; export performance

## Introduction

Previous studies have focused on using internationalization as an export strategy since the late 1950s (Zaki, 2019). The internationalization process is gradual and unique to each business operating in a foreign market instead of their local market. Businesses need to comprehend the culture and work environment of the country they intend to operate in, to ensure profitability and success. Successful international business operations are achieved through a firm's ability to adapt to cultural differences (Bowen, 2020). According to entrepreneurship scholars, internationalization is the process of exploring opportunities in foreign markets to gain a competitive edge (Zaki, 2019).

According to Muriu (2021), businesses looking to expand globally often engage in internationalization activities such as exporting, foreign direct investment (FDI), franchising,

international joint ventures, and digital platforms. Firms seek to export because it is the least complicated way to participate in global trade, less capital investment than other export entry strategies, and it is uncomplicated to stop exporting directly than to take out from different entry modes (Root, 1998). a significant amount of research on SMEs focuses on their involvement in international trade, and it is important to explore alternative methods for entering new markets (Anggadwita & Indarti, 2023).

Exports are defined as goods produced, manufactured, or imported for subsequent local re-exports and are regarded as exports when taken out of the country (Sabri, 2016). Exporting is a significant activity for the nation's economic development (Imran et al., 2017). The export activity aims to optimize the country's foreign exchange and revenue reserves (Malhotra & Kumari, 2016; Imran et al., 2017). Previous researchers have tested various studies to determine how SMEs' export performance provides value to owners, customers, and the country (Gupta & Chauhan, 2021). Generally, SMEs face intense competition in the business world due to the emergence of more sophisticated markets and unpredictable customer preferences. (Stouraitis et al., 2017).

### ***Halal SMEs in Malaysia***

Malaysia's economy and market value benefit significantly from the substantial contribution of SMEs. Due to their large workforce, SMEs are considered a significant player in the national economy, especially in today's highly competitive global environment (Genc et al., 2019). SMEs in Malaysia are classified according to their annual turnover or the number of full-time employees. The definition of SMEs was established by the National SME Development Council (NSDC) in 2005. This definition is currently used by multiple ministries, financial institutions, agencies, and regulators involved in SME development programs. Table 1 defines SMEs based on their size and sector.

**Table 1 Definition of SMEs by NSDC**

<b>Size/ Sector</b>	<b>Manufacturing</b>	<b>Services and other sectors</b>
<b>Micro</b>	The firm's annual sales are below RM300,000, or they have at most five full-time employees.	The total sales generated is below RM300,000, and the number of permanent staff is less than five.
<b>Small</b>	The revenue generated ranged from RM300,000 to below RM15 million, and the employee turnover for full-time staff was between 5 and below 75.	The range of sales turnover is between RM300,000 and RM3 million, with a staff of 5 to 30 full-time employees.
<b>Medium</b>	The annual revenue increased from RM15 million to RM50 million, and the permanent staff grew from 75 to 200.	The revenue generated from sales increased from RM3 million to a maximum of RM20 million, or the number of full-time employees increased from 30 to 75.

Source: [www.smeCorp.gov.my](http://www.smeCorp.gov.my)

The Malaysia Business Strategic Plan (2022-2030) has identified five focus areas and key success factors to achieve their goals (Mohamad et al., 2022). One of these focus areas is the internationalization of SMEs. It has been recognized that SMEs must participate more in regional trade and business cooperation to shift their focus from domestic to global (Omar et al., 2022). The internationalization of firms has become a crucial strategy for SMEs to survive and grow. Competing internationally is inevitable for businesses, whether now or in the future. Among the important roles of SMEs in developing and emerging economies is to provide job opportunities and encourage economic activity. SMEs can expand their business by exporting their products to foreign markets. Through this, they can increase their revenue, which will lead to the growth of employment opportunities and the country's overall gross domestic product

(GDP) (Safari & Saleh, 2020). SMEs ought to seek out prospects within their home country and consider expanding their business into other nations. Exporting is one of the best opportunities for SMEs to expand their business internationally (Nave & Ferreira, 2023). SMEs encounter numerous obstacles when capitalising on growth opportunities in a fiercely competitive landscape.

Malaysia is a predominantly Islamic country, with a diverse population of different races and religions. Malaysia is widely recognized for its manufacturing and shipment of halal products, and it is greatly supported by the government and several organizations like the JAKIM, Halal Development Corporation (HDC), and the Malaysian Foreign Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE). Malaysia has invested heavily in the Halal industry, particularly in local producers, including SMEs, with millions of dollars being channeled towards attracting and supporting these players (Elias et al., 2019).

### ***Halal Industries in Malaysia***

The term "Halal" has its roots in Arabic and signifies "acceptable" or "lawful." It encompasses every facet of a Muslim's daily routine, such as food, drinks, and other areas (Hasan & Tanakinjal, 2020). Conversely, "Haram" is the antonym for Halal, meaning "prohibited" or "forbidden." Examples of non-Halal foods include pork, alcohol, and dogs. The Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, outlines the rules for Halal food. Obtaining a Halal certificate from JAKIM requires meeting certain conditions set by the authority, which SMEs must comply with.

Halal, as defined by the Trade Description Act 2011, refers to goods or food items that are permissible for use or consumption by Muslims. The term "halal" means that the food or other goods meet specific requirements, which include:

- a. The food does not contain any animal parts or substances that Hukum Sharak forbids Muslims from consuming or not slaughtering, based on Hukum Sharak's rules.
- b. Hukum Sharak frees food from impurities.
- c. The food is not intoxicating, as per Hukum Sharak.
- d. The food contains no human limbs or products Hukum Sharak prohibits.
- e. The food is safe for consumption and poses no health hazards.
- f. The equipment used to process, prepare, or manufacture the food has not been contaminated.
- g. The food is not in contact with or stored near any food that fails to meet the standards stated in (a) and (b).

The popularity of halal products is increasing globally, especially in Muslim nations and certified halal goods. This surge in demand is prompting firms to transition their practices towards being halal-certified. (Husin et al., 2021). The halal industry encompasses more than just food products. Other sectors, such as cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, toiletries, finance, and tourism, also play a significant role (Soebahar et al., 2021). Septiana (2018) states that halal certification assures a product conforms to Islamic dietary laws and contains only permissible elements from start to finish, making it a symbol of value, health, and ecosystem. Halal products also attract non-Muslim consumers due to their strict guidelines and processing rules, which ensure cleanliness and safety (Siti Zakiah et al., 2023).

The profitable business segment of halal products has been on the rise, particularly for SMEs in Malaysia, due to the increasing demand. Malaysia has launched the Halal Industry Master Plan 2030 (HIMP 2030) to boost the production of halal products and strengthen the country's halal industry (Ibrahim et al., 2022). In 2022, Malaysia's halal export value was RM59.46 billion, which accounted for 3.8% of its total export value. However, the halal export value for SMEs was only RM5.1 billion, which was 8.58% of the total export value (Jaswir et al., 2023). Most halal SMEs lack resources such as finance, knowledge, and workmanship (Ariff et al.,

2020). Therefore, SMEs must establish and implement plans to stay competitive in the expanding halal market.

Various initiatives taken by the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (MEDAC) are helping to enhance the abilities of entrepreneurs in the halal industry. These include providing training and consultancy for halal certification, developing halal product branding, improving manufacturing processes, training human capital, and offering export incentives (Othman et al., 2019). However, this has always been a challenging task. The government has identified several issues and challenges that domestic halal SMEs face when trying to strengthen Malaysia's halal brand and increase product visibility. To produce products and services with more excellent added value, it is necessary to enhance innovation and research and development (R&D) capabilities. Furthermore, more dynamism is required to achieve this goal.

### ***Problem Statement***

The Malaysian government has launched initiatives to support halal SMEs, including improving export performance and capacity to tap into halal opportunities (Hasan et al., 2020). The Halal Industry Master Plan 2030 recommends accelerating internationalization of halal SMEs, with Islamic Finance playing a key role. The strategy's objective is to enhance the involvement of Islamic finance in funding the supply of halal industry, with the intent of establishing innovative, high-performing, and competitive SMEs. (Elasrag, 2019). This can contribute to sustainable socio-economic growth. The government provides financial support to SMEs, including credit and interest (Hu & Kee, 2022).

SMEs are crucial to Malaysia's economy, and HDC introduced the "Halal Business Transformation" program to maintain their competitiveness. HDC offers various programs to support local halal manufacturers and service providers. There are several programs available, such as the Halal Outreach Program for Entrepreneurs (HOPE), the Halal Technology Transformation Program (HTTP), the Product Transformation Program (PuTRA), as well as the international programs, namely Product Registration Incentive - Prince and Market Access Incentive - MASSIVE. However, halal SME exports are significantly less affecting their market competitiveness (Teoh et al. 2022).

Several previous studies have highlighted various issues and obstacles that halal SMEs face when entering the global market. These include needing more halal talent or human capital expertise (Wee et al., 2019). Ismail et al. (2023) found that top management may need more motivation to go international. According to Rahim et al. (2020), there was also a need for more understanding of the halal procedure, which presented a challenge for halal SMEs. Denicolai et al. (2021) discovered that SMEs can expand internationally with the help of digital transformation. Uthamaputhran et al. (2019) reported that many halal SMEs need a personal network to leverage their business. Finally, the absence of the ability to innovate and conduct R&D for high-value-added products and services is a crucial obstacle (HDC in 2022).

To examine the influence of export performance among halal SMEs in Malaysia, a study will be conducted using innovation capabilities as a moderator to test the moderating effect between influence factors and competitive advantage (Tavassoli, 2018). This study aims to examine how various factors influence the export performance of halal SMEs in Malaysia. The RBV and networking theories will be combined to form a framework that supports the research.

### ***Research Gap***

Prior research has focused on the impact of human capital on a company's competitiveness (Liu, 2017; Shafiee, 2022). The main objective of this research is to explore the correlation between export performance and human capital. The research specifically focuses on the

expertise and skills of the workforce (Rodríguez et al., 2020). Additionally, the research explores how implementing technological innovation impacts organizations in the organizational setting. The results will assist in identifying methods for employees to enhance and refine their skills, resulting in a competitive advantage for halal SMEs.

SMEs face challenges in exporting due to limited managerial capabilities. Top management experience and international knowledge can give firms a competitive edge (Hugill & Helfat, 2016). However, it is unclear how managerial capabilities contribute to export performance. Factors like identifying potential customers, managing export sales, and having knowledge of foreign markets hinder firms' performance in foreign markets (Payne & Katrinli, 2020). Thus, this study aims to explore how managerial capabilities effect halal SME export performance.

SMEs face challenges with the HAMS due to a lack of resources. Obtaining a halal certificate can boost consumer confidence, expand the market, and increase sales and profits (Hamid et al., 2022). However, non-compliance notices reveal the need for better HAMS management (Othman et al., 2019). The purpose of this research is to investigate how the adoption of HAMS affects firms' competitive advantage by looking at the export performance of SMEs in Malaysia.

Digitization is a valuable tool for SMEs to innovate and grow their businesses (Parida et al., 2019). Many questions still need to be answered about how firms can leverage digitization to transform their business models and gain an edge over their competitors. Although digital transformations are necessary to integrate, control, and consolidate international operations, they are rarely examined as determinants of SMEs' international development (Kim et al., 2018). According to previous studies, digital transformation is a crucial competitive asset that enhances capabilities, facilitates relationships with value chain members (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020), and positively impacts sustainable production (Seuring et al., 2022). Further research is required to investigate the relationship between digital transformation and SME export performance.

Initiatives implemented by the Malaysian government have encouraged SMEs to engage in early internationalization (Fahahat et al., 2020). The effect of these endeavours on the ability of firms to compete has yet to be established (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2019). According to Fahahat et al. (2020), the government provides financial and marketing support as its primary assistance means. In building export competitiveness, government support is the primary source of assistance for firms (Njinyah, 2018). More research is needed on how government support initiatives affect capabilities and international performance (Coudounaris, 2018). This study examines how government support assists early internationalizing firms in expanding globally more quickly.

The networking capability of halal SMEs plays a crucial role in their success in the global economy (Fahalat et al., 2018). This capability involves establishing and managing networks to obtain external resources that complement their own (Shafiee et al. in 2023). In addition, the ability to innovate is crucial in determining a firm's success in achieving a competitive edge and exporting its products (Ayob et al., 2022). This study explores how network capability, export performance, and innovation capabilities interact and affect the competitiveness of SMEs. This research will investigate whether innovation capabilities moderate the relationship between network capability and export performance.

### ***Research Objective***

This study examines the factors affecting SMEs' export efficiency in Malaysia, specifically in halal products. Innovation capability would moderate the link between influencing factors and competitive advantage. The following are the research objectives:



- i. To scrutinize a significant positive correlation between competitive advantage and human capital.
- ii. To analyze a positive and significant correlation between competitive advantage and the Halal Assurance Management System (HASM).
- iii. To examine a significant positive correlation between competitive advantage and digital transformation.
- iv. To investigate a significant positive correlation between competitive advantage and managerial capability.
- v. To evaluate a significant positive correlation between competitive advantage and government support.
- vi. To explore a significant positive correlation between competitive advantage and networking capabilities.
- vii. To study a positive and significant correlation between export performance and competitive advantage.
- viii. To determine whether innovation capabilities fortify the relationship between the independent variables (human capital, HASM, digital transformation, managerial capability, government support, and networking capabilities) and the competitive advantage of halal SMEs.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Underlying theories***

RBV theory and networking theory are integrated in this study. The study also includes HASM practices as a variable in RBV theory. The study suggests that digitalization improves firms' competitiveness. In addition, the research indicates that having the ability to innovate plays a pivotal role in regulating the link between the resources, capabilities, and competitive advantage of firms.

### ***Resource-Based-View (RBV)***

Jay Barney introduced the RBV theory in 1991, an essential concept in business management. Firms can achieve a sustainable competitive advantage over time by focusing on resources and capabilities, according to the theory (Nason & Wiklund, 2018; D'Oria et al., 2021). The theory of RBV describes three essential ideas: the firms' resources, an advantage in competition, and the ability to maintain that competitive advantage over time (Barney, 1991). It classifies tangible and intangible assets as a set of firm resources and capabilities, including management expertise, organizational processes, routines, and information and knowledge control strategies.

D'Oria et al. (2021) emphasize that the RBV theory highlights the significance of possessing resources that are valuable, rare, non-substitutable, and imitable to establish a competitive edge and generate value. Sukaatmadja et al. (2023) have emphasized that intangible resources play a vital role in enhancing firms' performance and competitive advantage. According to the theory, firms must possess intangible resources to improve performance and gain a competitive edge. This can be accomplished by obtaining valuable, scarce, and expensive resources to compete effectively.

This theory proposes that a firm controls resource firms by utilizing internal resources to design and implement plans that enhance efficiency and effectiveness (Fong & Chang, 2021). Different firms have different characteristics and are not easily moved, which leads to differences in competitive advantage. A firm that can sustain its competitive edge can leverage its resources to capitalize on opportunities and mitigate the effects of environmental threats (Barney, 1991; Jeung & Chung, 2021).

Previously, the author compiled a list of firm attributes that can help generate value-creating strategies (Barney, 1991; Chigara, 2021). Three primary categories can be used to classify the characteristics of a successful firm: resources related to human capital, physical capital, and organizational capital. Human capital resources refer to the collective knowledge, talents, abilities, and other essential qualities employees acquire through education, training, and employment-related information (Vodenko & Lyausheva, 2020). Qua & Chen (2021) have emphasized the significance of specific vital resources in enhancing a firm's competitive edge. However, physical capital resources are the tangible assets that a company possesses, such as plant and equipment, raw materials, and geographic location.

Various scholars have researched how a company's resources influence its competitiveness and ability to export. Chigara (2021) looked at physical, human, and organizational capital, while Zhang and Jiden (2022) explored how technical and innovation capabilities can improve export success. Mitreğa (2023) found that having good networking capabilities can enhance export performance. Ipek and Tanyerithe (2020) conducted a study investigating the link between the export market orientation, the institutional environment of the country of origin, and export performance. The study aimed to explore how these factors are interconnected. Fauzi et al. (2022) discovered that adopting HAMS led to an enhancement in the competitiveness of firms. More research is needed regarding the relationship between HAMS and competitive advantage. This research explores the impact of HAMS and competitive advantage on firms' export performance, which is an exclusive aspect of this study. The research expands the context of HAMS to SMEs and considers digitalization and networking as additional variables to reinforce the RBV theory. SMEs lack competitiveness due to low technology adoption, limited access to finance, and the absence of skilled talent. Furthermore, the productivity gap between SMEs and large firms has widened due to low technology adoption and high dependence on inexperienced workers.

### ***The Networking Theory***

Social network analysis is the most suitable perspective for elucidating how SMEs go global. Many studies based on empirical research have utilized this approach to provide further insights into the internationalization process and various aspects of the international strategy employed by SMEs. Consequently, this theory is the most appropriate method for scrutinizing the export performance of SMEs.

Aldrich (2006), Coleman (1988), and Granovetter (1985) are researchers who have presented fundamental theories of social networking, which are shaped by the underpinnings of other theories. This study identified three theories based on a literature review of networking and internationalization. The relationship approach explains how large and small firms select a suitable international partner, focusing on informal relations, such as the strength of ties, and aspects of network structure, such as size and diversity, to justify network-based phenomena. Anwar et al. (2018) defined networking as forming productive connections with other businesses, firms, industries, competitors, and suppliers to acquire valuable information and distinct resources. This technique has focused on people's processes and mechanisms in social structures to access resources and information.

Forming and sustaining relationships with customers, suppliers, and other organizations is crucial for firms to access essential resources. This research aims to improve our understanding of the connection between networking capabilities and the RBV theory. This can be achieved by acknowledging the crucial role networking capabilities play in achieving competitiveness in business. This study aims to enhance comprehension of the topic by stating that networking capabilities are a crucial element in attaining business competitiveness.

***Export Performance***

The export performance of a firm or organization refers to its ability to sell domestically produced products or services on international markets (Arun & Ozmutlu, 2023). Planning and executing effective export marketing strategies is crucial for firms to achieve their global strategic and economic objectives for exporting products or services (Ipek & Tanyeri, 2020). The performance of a firm's export operations is evaluated based on how well it achieves its financial and non-financial objectives (Saferi & Saleh, 2019). Export performance is a cost-effective driver for economic growth, employment opportunities, and living standards (Rua & França, 2017). Key determinants affect export performance, including internal factors such as firm innovation, assets, entrepreneurial orientation, key personnel, unique resources, financial capability, skills, and experienced employees (Wu et al., 2022).

***Human Capital***

According to the RBV theory, human capital is a resource that cannot be touched and is of utmost importance. The knowledge, skills, and experience that employees possess drive a firm's export performance, as noted by Ferreira and Simoes in 2016. Becker's (1975) research suggests that human capital is acquired through formal education and general experience and can be utilized across different tasks. Stucki's (2016) study indicates that analyzing human capital can assist companies in quickly identifying and evaluating information related to foreign market opportunities, overcoming challenges, and acquiring new knowledge and skills necessary for international markets. The definition of human capital utilized in this study is based on the research conducted by Rodríguez and Orellana (2019). According to their findings, human capital refers to the knowledge and abilities possessed by employees that allow them to create new processes, solve problems, and develop solutions within the organization.

***Halal Assurance Management System (HAMS)***

Halal certification ensures goods' cleanliness, quality, and safety throughout production to comply with legal obligations (Sulaiman et al., 2021). Ensuring consistency and sustainability in the production of halal goods is vital, as Fauzi et al. (2022) emphasise. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to implement HAMS, which ensures that the materials, processes, products, human resources, and methods used in halal production are by halal standards. The various components of HAMS include product development and flow chart validation, management systems documentation, control measures implementation, corrective care actions, a halal guidelines database, and traceability (Othman et al., 2016). This system is particularly useful in eliminating potential food hazards, such as microbiological, chemical, or physical contaminants that may arise during food production, thereby ensuring high-quality and halal-compliant products. The HAMS system utilized in this study aligns with the halal production standards set forth by JAKIM's halal certificate criteria, as described in the Malaysian Halal Certification Procedure Manual 2014 (Third Revision). HAMS aims to establish, execute, and sustain a consistent halal production process. The study conducted by Wibowo and Violita (2020) is based on this system. Othman et al. (2019) state that firms must ensure sustainable and consistent halal status.

***Managerial Capabilities***

Hugill and Helfat (2016) define managerial capability as the ability of managers to oversee organizations by implementing strategic and operational decisions while also impacting and coordinating other resources, inputs, and abilities of the firm. The development and innovation of the firm depend on the managers' ability to carry out strategic and entrepreneurial activities (Helfat & Raubitschek, 2018). According to Guenduez and Mergel (2022), management



capabilities can be defined as making strategic decisions that capture business models to create value for customers, recognizing changes in customers' needs and hidden demands, and observing the organizational environment and technological developments. The organization's capacity should be flexible enough for managers to reconfigure it and enable strategic renewal of its resources and capabilities. This is an essential skill for managers to possess. This enables the organization to continue acquiring and exporting activities to SMEs.

### ***Digital Transformation***

Integrating digital technologies into human activities is complex and multidimensional (Kraft et al., 2021). For managers, the challenge lies in comprehending digital technology and utilizing it to advance their organizations and businesses (Heavin & Power, 2018). George et al. (2020) suggest that further research is necessary to understand how digital transformation affects sustainable development in new businesses. Studies conducted in the past have shown that adopting digital technologies can positively affect businesses, leading to enhanced operational efficiency and broader market reach, extending beyond regional boundaries to a global scale (OECD in 2021). SMEs need more financial and human resources, making digital transformation critical to compete with larger businesses and remain competitive. This was highlighted in studies by Bouwman et al. in 2019, Akpan et al. in 2020, and Lee & Kao in 2015. This study defines digital transformation as a systematic, complex organizational effort incorporating advanced digital technologies. Mai et al. (2023) described how digital transformation can improve goods, services, and business models by promoting greater collaboration among an organization's business areas. Platforms like Big Data, the Internet of Things, and cloud computing have paved the way for digital transformation, as stated by Hess et al. (2020) and Warner & Wäger (2019). These platforms allow businesses to usher in new digital management technologies and update obsolete business models. Thuy (2021) also supports this viewpoint.

### ***Government Support***

Government support refers to programs with a clearly defined budget that encompass various activities that benefit different groups of people (Zakaria, 2020). Such support can come in the form of financial assistance, including tax relief and employment-related measures, and is often extended to SMEs (Vaghefi & Jo-yee, 2021). These programs aim to improve productivity by enhancing business infrastructure, developing policies, and creating a regulatory environment that fosters competitiveness in different industries (Guan et al., 2018). In this context, government support can be defined as an array of measures that includes market assessment, human capital development, digitalization, innovation, and infrastructure support (SMECorp, 2021). These measures are designed to improve organizational performance (Han et al., 2017) and enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of halal SMEs.

### ***Networking Capabilities***

A business can benefit from its networking capabilities, which are its connections with other firms, industries, competitors, and suppliers, to acquire valuable information and unique resources (Anwar et al., 2018). Firms can benefit significantly from these capabilities as they enhance their market orientation positively (Kurniawan et al., 2020). Firms' networking capabilities can facilitate acquiring strategic resources and gaining a competitive advantage (Dhameria et al., 2021). The concept of 'network' pertains to formal and social connections among individuals, companies, and their key business associates, including family members, suppliers, customers, government agencies, financial institutions, business groups, and other business partnerships (Zaki, 2019). Farida and Nuryakin (2021) have provided a definition and

dimension of networking capability that this study will adopt. Networking capability refers to the collection of organizational activities and routines that a firm implements to establish, develop, and terminate business relationships to gain an advantage. The capacity to identify, generate, and regulate networking with external entities is also a crucial factor that can favourable performance.

### ***Innovation Capabilities***

Product innovation capability pertains to a firm's potential to meet customer demands by providing unique and distinct products and the ability to create, modify, or innovate their existing products or services. (Fahalat et al., 2020; Pham et al., 2017). Piñera-Salmerón et al. (2023) state that product innovation capability involves either the creation of new products or services or enhancing existing ones. Innovation capabilities can be seen as improvements in product characteristics, the extension of product lines, or adapting to meet user requirements (Kahn, 2018). These capabilities enable firms to better adjust to new market demands (Filipescu et al., 2013; Lewandowska et al., 2016) and provide unique products (Ayob et al., 2022; Saridakis et al., 2019). Product innovation is associated with an increased propensity to export for firms and success in international markets. For the study, the definition of innovation capability is adopted from Yang and Ju (2018), who describe it as the improvement of products, services, processes, or systems that enable a firm to offer superior innovation compared to other valuable and rare firms. Therefore, a firm that adapts to changing customer needs and current conditions can gain a competitive advantage when supported.

### ***Competitive Advantage***

Firms require a competitive advantage to thrive in the market, create networks, and set up industry systems (Mehta et al., 2020). According to Negulescu (2019), a competitive advantage is achieved by combining a firm's primary and secondary resources and capabilities through well-coordinated activity systems. The allocation of costs and operating results of a competitive advantage depends on the positioning strategy used, which gives the firm an advantage over its competitors (Işoraitè, 2018). However, it is essential to note that competitive advantage is not permanent and can be copied, leading to continuous competitive wars. Zhang and Song (2020) define competitive advantage in this study as the SME's ability to generate profits through better performance than their competitors, which is the primary focus of this study. The study investigates how competitive advantage mediates between independent variables and export performance, making it a crucial aspect of the research.

## **Hypothesis Development**

### ***Human Capital and Competitive Advantage***

This study defines human capital as the knowledge and abilities that workers acquire to solve problems and create new organizational solutions and processes (Rodríguez & Orellana, 2019). Human capital can provide competitive advantages by improving workers' education, knowledge, creativity, cognitive skills, and problem-solving abilities (Cooper et al., 1994). The literature highlights the importance of human capital in gaining competitive advantages (Lopez-Cabrales & Valle-Cabrera, 2019). Studies have shown that human capital has a positive impact on competitive advantage, firm competitiveness (Lafuente et al., 2020; Iqbal et al., 2023; Shafiee et al., 2023), and export performance (Mubarik et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impact of human capital on competitive advantage, with the hypothesis that:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive and significant relationship between human capital and the competitive advantage of halal SMEs.

***Managerial Capabilities and Competitive Advantage***

In a study by Guenduez and Mergel (2022), managerial capabilities were defined as tasks that encompass acquiring knowledge and providing clarification. Identifying changes in customer needs and latent demands is one of the activities. Another activity is observing the firm's environment and technological advancements. Making strategic and business model decisions to provide value to customers and the firm is also essential. In addition, reconfiguring firm capabilities is necessary to ensure the strategic renewal of the firm, its resources, and capabilities. All these activities are essential for the firm to continue exporting to SMEs. Previous studies conducted by Chatterjee et al. in 2023 have revealed a significant correlation between knowledge managerial capability and SME competitiveness. Additionally, Lin et al. (2017) and Sheshadri (2020) have found that effective management capability motivates employees to explore their interests that benefit the firm. The study proposes a hypothesis that can be attributed to the following outcome:

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive and significant relationship between managerial capabilities and the competitive advantage of halal SMEs.

***Halal Assurance Management System and Competitive Advantage***

The management, implementation, and maintenance of a firm's halal certificate, as well as the continuity of the halal production process based on criteria from JAKIM, were ensured through the use of the Malaysian Halal Certification Procedure Manual 2014 (Third Revision) (Wibowo & Violita's, 2020). SMEs in the halal food industry have been found to benefit from implementing HAMS, as it improves business performance for export readiness (Abd Hamid et al., 2022). Guiyanti et al. (2021) and Zailani et al. (2020) have all found that implementing the halal system can improve a firm's performance and competitive advantage, Zainuddin et al. (2019). Fauzi et al. (2022) and Othman et al. (2019) have also reported that implementing halal assurance systems can significantly impact competitive advantages. HAMS, which stands for Hazard Analysis and Management System, is distinct from other quality certifications like ISO 9001 or Good Manufacturing as it relies on practical field engagement, documentation management, and internal control (Othman et al., 2019). Considering this information, a hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive and significant relationship exists between the product Halal Assurance Management System and the competitive advantage of halal SMEs.

***Digital Transformation and Competitive Advantage***

Digital transformation involves the integration of advanced digital technologies with significant organizational efforts to modify the information technology infrastructure of businesses and operations (Mai et al., 2023). The emergence of platforms such as social media, e-commerce, and mobile computing has enabled businesses to expand their boundaries and establish digital partnerships with their collaborators. This has provided SMEs with new services, markets, and business models, allowing them to grow and compete globally. Firms are adopting digital transformation as a new approach to gain a competitive advantage (Chen et al., 2021). Previous research has demonstrated that businesses that have implemented digital transformation have experienced positive impacts on their organizational performance (Eller et al., 2022). Furthermore, digital transformation enhances productivity (Sahu et al., 2018) and encourages sustainable and innovative development (Vial, 2021). The competitive advantage of SMEs is greatly affected by digital transformation, according to the description provided above. As a result, the hypothesis of this study can be stated as follows:

Hypothesis 4: There is a positive and significant relationship between digital transformation and the competitive advantage of halal SMEs.

***Government Support and Competitive Advantage***

The aid provided by the government to enterprises, which includes monetary and non-monetary assistance, is referred to as government support (SMECorp, 2021). The support includes measures such as market assessment, infrastructure, innovation, digitalization, and human capital development, and aims to increase firm sustainability competitiveness (Han et al., 2017). Supporting SMEs is crucial for stimulating innovation and fostering economic growth. To benefit from government support, SMEs can utilize different aid programs offered by various ministries and agencies, such as financing, promotion, marketing, and developing capacity (Nurul et al., 2019). As per the findings of Khan et al. (2021), the connection between SMEs' sustainable competitive advantage in Pakistan is positively influenced by government financial assistance. As per the findings of Khan et al. (2021), the connection between SMEs' sustainable competitive advantage in Pakistan is positively influenced by government financial assistance. Songling et al. (2018) conducted a study that found a considerable influence of government support, both financial and non-financial, on a firm's sustainable competitive position and performance. The research's objective is to analyze the effects of government support on competitive advantage. Accordingly, the study proposes a hypothesis as below:

Hypothesis 5: There is a positive and significant relationship between government support and the competitive advantage of halal SMEs.

***Networking Capabilities and Competitive Advantage***

Networking capabilities refer to a firm's ability to establish and maintain strong relationships with external entities. This includes finding, building, and managing relationships that impact export performance (Farida & Nuryakin, 2021). For small firms that face limited resources, networking is particularly crucial as it enables them to access external resources. Businesses can gain mutual benefits by accessing shared expertise and knowledge through networking capability (Partanen et al., 2020). Firms can effectively manage their limited internal resources and tap into external capabilities to achieve growth by collaborating with partners and being responsive to customers' needs (Manurung & Kurniawan, 2021). Prior studies have highlighted the potential benefits of networking capability. Anser et al. (2021) observed that building and sustaining network structures positively impacts firm performance. Karami et al. (2023) and Alkahtani et al. (2020) discovered that networking capability and firm performance are positively correlated. This correlation leads to increased competitiveness and better international performance for SMEs. The present study seeks to investigate the connection between networking capabilities and competitive advantage with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: There is a positive and significant relationship between networking capabilities and the competitive advantage of halal SMEs.

***Competitive Advantage and Export Performance***

Zhang and Song (2020) suggest that SMEs can achieve a competitive edge by surpassing their competitors and generating profits. Yasa et al. (2020) also suggest that solid marketing performance can contribute to a firm's competitive advantage. When a firm's assets offer customers more excellent value than its competitors, it gains an edge, resulting in better performance (Sukaatmadja et al., 2021). Charoensukmongkol (2020) states that businesses that possess enough assets to conduct export activities and the capability to produce competitive products can gain a competitive edge, which can result in better export performance. This study explores the link between competitive advantage and export performance of halal-based SMEs in Malaysia. The hypothesis of the study is as follows:

Hypothesis 7: There is a positive and significant relationship between competitive advantage and export performance of halal SMEs.



***Innovation Capabilities Strengthen the Relationship between Human Capital and Competitive Advantage***

The level of technology does not solely determine productivity, as human capital plays a vital role (Mankiw et al., 1992). Human capital is a critical component in the innovation process, complementing technology (Mohammad et al., 2018). As a result, when moving towards a given technology frontier, higher levels of human capital are more efficient in adopting new technologies. Previous studies have suggested that a firm's human resources influence its capacity to innovate, generate revenue, and compete in the marketplace (Claudia & Iacopo, 2020). To remain competitive, firms must strive for innovation. Innovation capabilities can make a firm's products or services more desirable, valuable, and unique than those of other firms (Yang & Ju, 2018). This study put forward the idea that innovation capability could act as a mediator between competitive advantage and human capital. It was predicted that firms possessing greater levels of human capital would have better innovation capabilities, ultimately leading to a more decisive competitive edge. Consequently, this research suggested that:

Hypothesis 8: Innovation capabilities strengthen the relationship between human capital and competitive advantage in export performance.

***Innovation Capabilities Strengthen the Relationship between HAMS and Competitive Advantage***

A firm's capacity for innovation relates to its ability to consistently generate new and innovative ideas regarding operational procedures and future needs through the creation of HAMS, which are essential for the competitiveness of SMEs (K. Noorliza, 2022). SMEs can establish an internal halal control system by implementing HAMS with minimal requirements from The Malaysia Halal Management System guidelines (Mulok & Shafii, 2020). Jaafar et al. (2021) state that innovation is not restricted to technological or product-related breakthroughs. It can occur in services, processes, or any social system, such as inventing new processes. Wibowo and Violita (2020) and Othman et al. (2019) have found that HAMS positively impacts a firm's competitive advantage. As a result, it is essential to comprehend how this connection can be strengthened. This research hypothesizes that:

Hypothesis 9: Innovation capabilities strengthen the relationship between the halal assurance management system and competitive advantage in export performance.

***Innovation Capabilities Strengthen the Relationship between Managerial Capability and Competitive Advantage***

Managers must possess strong managerial skills to effectively utilize a company's assets, skills, and abilities to create, merge, and reshape them. This ability is shaped by position and process and is considered a competitive advantage, as it enables high-performance routines to operate within the organization (Helfat & Martin, 2015). Firms first focus on improving innovation capability, as technology development leads to competitiveness. However, managerial capability is essential to transform technological ideas into marketable products. Practical entrepreneurship is only possible with managerial capability (Won-Sik et al., 2020). A study conducted by Chatterjee et al. in 2023 demonstrated that a company can improve its overall ability by enhancing its managerial practices. To cope with the challenges posed by the ever-changing business landscape, firms must be creative and market-driven. SMEs must enhance their management methodologies and procedures by integrating novel technologies to stay ahead of the competition (de Moura & Saroli, 2021). SMEs can improve their ability to innovate by embracing new technologies. A study has been conducted to investigate how this connection can be intensified. The hypothesis being tested is:



Hypothesis 10: Innovation capabilities strengthen the relationship between managerial capability and competitive advantage in export performance.

***Innovation Capabilities Strengthen the Relationship between Digital Transformation and Competitive Advantage***

Digital transformation has gained attention as an effective business strategy. SMEs face the challenge of continuously improving their business practices and capabilities (Vrontis et al., 2021). Verhoef et al. (2021) define digital transformation as developing and executing a novel digital business model that modifies how a firm utilizes digital technologies to generate and acquire more excellent value. The use of digital technology by start-up SMEs can have an impact on both economic and social value, as noted by Savic (2022). Vana et al. (2021) and Vrontis et al. (2022) have found that utilizing technological tools can produce varied outcomes on the performance and expansion of SMEs. Numerous research studies have indicated that digital transformation is crucial in determining a firm's competitive edge. Nevertheless, the significance of innovation capabilities in regulating the correlation between digital transformation and competitive advantage has been overlooked, as pointed out by Shehadeh et al. in 2023. Consequently, this research suggests that:

Hypothesis 11: Innovation capabilities strengthen the relationship between digital transformation and competitive advantage in export performance.

***Innovation Capabilities Strengthen the Relationship between Government Support and Competitive Advantage***

The survival of SMEs in any economy depends on government support. With government support, SMEs can thrive in any economy. Extensive advantages can be derived from such assistance, allowing SMEs to participate in innovative initiatives. This, in turn, assists them in enhancing their abilities and utilizing supportive measures, leading to increased employment opportunities. In Malaysia, the government has introduced various programs to assist with financing and stimulate the growth of SMEs as innovative entrepreneurs. These initiatives include new policies and incentives to help SMEs innovate their business roles and improve economic performance. A previous study by Gligah and Zaidin (2023) has confirmed that non-financial government support significantly impacts firm performance and that product innovation capabilities indirectly strengthen the link between the two. Thus, this study hypothesis:

Hypothesis 12: Innovation capabilities strengthen the relationship between government support and competitive advantage in export performance.

***Innovation Capabilities Strengthen the Relationship between Networking Capabilities and Competitive Advantage***

Acquiring shared expertise and knowledge for mutual benefits and utilizing strategic network resources to gain access to advantageous capabilities are the essence of networking capabilities, a key concept in business (Cenamor et al., 2019). Networking capacities enable the creation, cultivation, and cessation of business connections to the organization's advantage. The firm implements activities and procedures to achieve these objectives (Mitrega et al., 2017). A significant level is access to the knowledge and other resources necessary for successful product development using networking. According to Nooteboom's (2005) research on networking characteristics, the structure of a network plays a crucial role in addressing structural gaps, while network density is a critical factor in determining performance. Karami et al. (2023) and Alkahtani et al. (2020) found that solid networking capabilities provide a significant competitive advantage. The strengthening of the connection is of great significance

and should be highlighted. As a result, this study hypothesized that innovation capabilities mediate networking and competitive advantage in export performance. Therefore, it was proposed that:

Hypothesis 13: Innovation capabilities weaken the relationship between networking capability and competitive advantage in export performance.

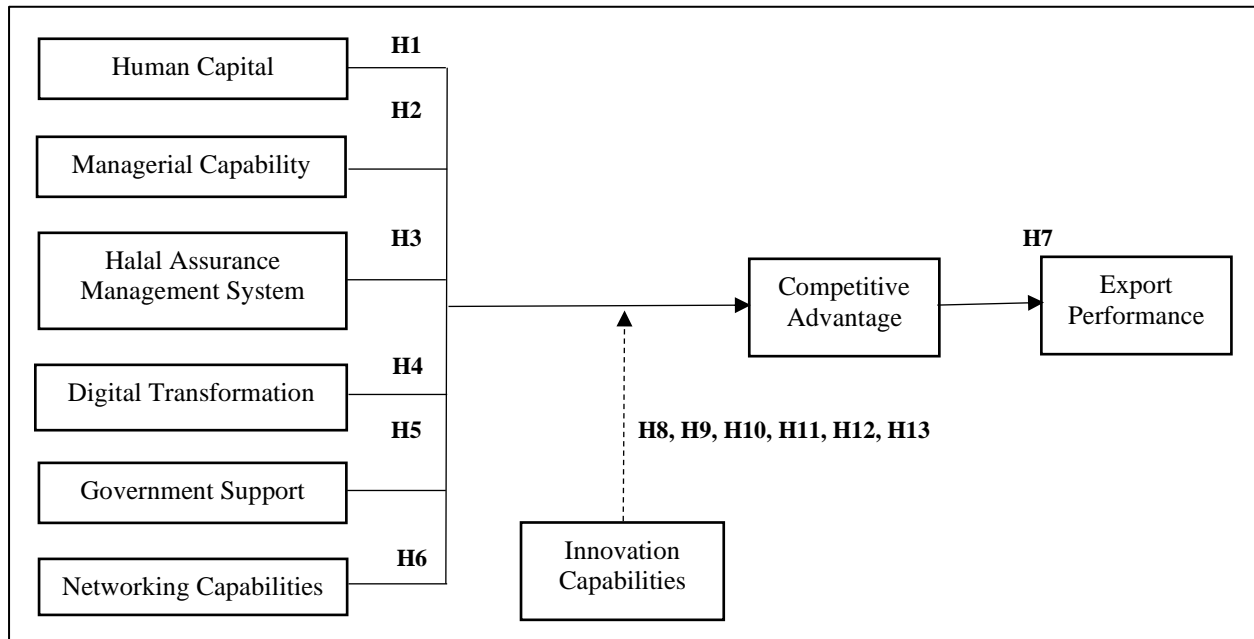


Figure 1: Research Conceptual Framework

## Methods

### Research Design

The objective of this research is to investigate further the relationships among different variables that affect the export efficiency of SMEs in Malaysia, with a specific focus on the halal industry sector. A correlational research design has been employed in this study to analyse the relationships between variables without manipulating them. This approach is considered appropriate for examining the connections between variables. The design of this study is well-matched to the research questions presented, as it offers a thorough and structured approach to exploring the connections between the variables being studied. This research aims to offer significant perspectives on the elements that impact the export efficiency of SMEs in Malaysia. This study seeks to help develop practical approaches that can improve their competitiveness on the world stage.

### Data Analysis Method

This research aims to analyze the relationship between the factors influencing SMEs' export performance in Malaysia's halal industry and their actual export performance using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is an appropriate statistical method for this study, as it permits examining direct and indirect effects in a complex model with a relatively small sample size.

The conceptual model will include latent constructs influencing export performance, including human capital, managerial capability, HAMS, digital transformation, government support and

networking capabilities. Manifest indicators for each construct will be derived from survey items measuring specific dimensions of each construct.

The dataset will be screened to detect missing data, and appropriate techniques will be implemented to address missing values, such as mean substitution or multiple imputation. The reliability and validity of measurement scales will be assessed using techniques like Cronbach's alpha and confirmatory factor analysis.

The PLS-SEM model will be estimated using software such as SmartPLS. Latent constructs will be modelled using their respective observed indicators, and the relationships between constructs will be assessed using path coefficients and bootstrapping techniques to test for statistical significance.

The results will be interpreted using the magnitude and direction of the path coefficients. These coefficients indicate the latent constructs' relationships' strength and direction. The statistical significance of indirect effects will be evaluated using bootstrapping techniques. The study will also delve into the theoretical implications of the results, along with the current body of literature on export performance within SMEs operating in the halal industry.

### ***Research Statistical Sample and Community***

A stratified random sampling approach will be employed to ensure that the sample of SMEs in Malaysia represents the population. In this approach, the population will be first divided into different strata based on two critical criteria: geographical regions and industry sectors. This will ensure that the sample is diverse and representative of Malaysia's regions and industries.

The geographical regions for the study will be defined based on the administrative divisions in Malaysia, such as states and federal territories. Conversely, the industry sectors will be defined based on the Malaysia Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (MITI), which categorizes industries based on their economic activity. This will help ensure that the sample includes a mix of different types of businesses, including those in the halal business sector.

Once the population has been divided into different strata, a random sample of SMEs will be selected from each stratum. The sample size from each stratum will be proportional to the stratum's size so that more extensive strata have a more significant representation in the sample. This approach will help ensure that the sample of SMEs in Malaysia is both diverse and representative of the population. By selecting a sample of SMEs representative of the population, the study will be able to draw more accurate and reliable conclusions about the attitudes and behaviours of SMEs in Malaysia, particularly those in the halal business sector.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

To conduct this study, the researcher will distribute structured surveys to SMEs that have received halal certification and are currently operating in Malaysia. The survey instrument will be developed based on a comprehensive literature review. It will gather information on the SMEs' business operations, financial performance, marketing strategies, and other related factors. The survey will undergo pilot testing with a group of SMEs before data collection is completed to ensure its reliability and validity. To maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, the survey administration will adhere to ethical standards and data privacy laws.

### ***Discussion and Conclusion***

Research conducted on the export performance of halal SMEs in Malaysia highlights certain crucial factors that not only aid in ensuring long-term growth but also significantly impact the competitive advantage of these businesses. The study, combining the RBV theory, networking

theory, and innovative practices like HAMS and digital transformation, reveals strategies SMEs in halal can apply to increase performance.

The above result indicates the sense and specification of human labor, management ability, government cooperation, digital transformation, and networking capacity in international SMEs. The available resources and benefits can be vital in helping SMEs in the halal industry gain access to and develop a competitive edge in the global markets, stand out with their distinct offerings, and remain a sustainable competitive entity. Additionally, this study unequivocally highlights the position of innovation competence as a moderator between several independent factors that positively influence competitive advantage.

Based on this theoretical foundation and practical analysis applied, this study revealed that aligning the resources of halal SMEs with what is essential for success in the international markets is a way of gaining a competitive advantage. SMEs can take full advantage of international entrepreneurship opportunities by nurturing a network of strategic business partners and accessing available governmental support schemes to develop their exporting activities and speed up their internationalization project success.

The findings of this research offer essential insights for policymakers, business owners, and managers in the halal industry. This includes providing more information about the export market, improving export quotas, and enhancing competitive capabilities. This valuable information can significantly benefit those involved in open markets. The study tackles the drawbacks and prospects of further investigation, such as focusing on the multiple independent factors contributing to halal export performance and performing additional empirical studies, apart from supporting a further advanced understanding of export performance dynamics among Malaysian halal SMEs.

Halal SMEs can achieve sustainable growth in the evolving landscape of the halal industry by embracing a holistic approach that integrates theoretical frameworks, innovative practices, and practical strategies. By navigating the complexities of global markets, halal SMEs can strengthen their competitive advantage.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

The impact of a firm's competitive advantage is examined in this study using the RBV theory, which assesses the influence of the firm's resources and capabilities. RBV theory is integrated with human capital, managerial capability, and networking capabilities to assess their contribution to halal SMEs' sustainable competitiveness and export performance.

Johanson and Mattsson's 1988 networking theory of internationalization provides a valuable framework for SMEs with limited resources. It suggests that well-established networks in foreign markets are crucial for SMEs to overcome resource challenges and expand internationally.

The study proposes a theoretical framework based on three fundamental theories, six factors influencing competitive advantage, and extended HAMS practices in SMEs (Hamid et al., 2022). The study aims to recognize the elements that influence the export capability of SMEs in Malaysia that produce halal products. Although the halal industry's SME export performance research is limited, it is critical to have a comprehensive understanding of the diverse environmental factors that can influence their success and develop creative methods to improve their capacity. Innovation capability is introduced as a mediator to comprehend the topic better. Jusufi et al. (2020), Kalinic & Brouthers (2022), Mubarik et al. (2020), and Safari & Saleh (2019) have all investigated the subject. By contributing to the theoretical knowledge of SME export performance in the halal industry in Malaysia, this study seeks to assist SMEs in the halal sector in improving their export performance.

**Practical Contribution**

This study aims to identify the variables that influence the export efficiency of halal SMEs in Malaysia. This research examines the impact of halal SMEs' resources and human capital in Malaysia on their export performance. The study also aims to evaluate the relationship between the different aspects of human capital and the export performance of these firms. Firms can use the insights gained from this study to enhance their export performance and gain an edge in the market.

Firms can leverage their internal culture and leadership to devise tactics that improve their export capabilities and help them adjust to the evolving market conditions. Effective leadership and culture can result in powerful market capabilities that drive competitiveness. Therefore, SMEs in the halal industry should leverage their strategic and managerial capacity to improve their organizations and achieve a competitive edge effectively.

As highlighted in this study, incorporating HAMS can impact a firm's competitive edge. Firms seeking to gain from halal certification can benefit from adopting HAMS for enhanced export performance and sustainable competitiveness. Firms can boost their sales revenue and profitability by integrating HAMS into their operations.

Based on empirical evidence, this study analyses digital transformation's impact on halal SMEs' export performance. Digital technologies provide significant opportunities for business improvement, enabling easy access to global markets and creating unique value propositions. Therefore, halal SMEs should develop strategies that use digital resources to penetrate global markets.

Firms are expected to enhance their export performance in emerging markets to qualify for government support initiatives. This study guides policymakers and business owners in facilitating the accumulation of international market knowledge and export commitments and helps SMEs gain competitive capabilities in export markets. By following these guidelines, SMEs can achieve tremendous success in international markets.

Networking capabilities play a crucial role in export performance. SMEs must foster international entrepreneurship by establishing friendly relationships and building strong bonds with foreign markets to enter the global market quickly. Therefore, managers can adopt competitive strategies to leverage networking and enhance their firm's internationalization plans.

This study reaffirms the link between competitive advantage and export performance. It provides valuable insights for halal SMEs in Malaysia, emphasizing the significance of resources in achieving export success. To gain a competitive advantage, firms must identify the key factors that align with their resource capabilities and exceed their expectations.

***Suggestions for future research and limitations***

The objective of the research was to construct a theoretical structure by utilizing factors from the RBV and networking theories, with a particular emphasis on Peninsular Malaysia. It is important to conduct additional empirical research to gain a deeper understanding of the factors impeding the export performance of halal SMEs in Malaysia. This research will shed light on additional independent factors that impact the export performance of SMEs.

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