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Interactive Effect of Export Strategic Orientations on Export Market Learning Ambidexterity: A Study of Turkish Export SMEs

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ABSTRACT

The interactive effect of export strategic orientations on export market learning ambidexterity has been studied in this paper. Export market orientation and export entrepreneurial orientation, as strategic orientations, have a complement feature among them, while ambidexterity itself is a complement form of exploration and exploitation. In this study, the relationship between these two complement effects was examined by using 291 export SMEs located in Turkey which is an emerging economy. According to the results, a great impact from interactive effect of strategic orientations to ambidexterity is examined. Also, in line with the previous researches, the results confirmed that export strategic orientations individually have impact on exploration and exploitation. The findings help provide a more complete understanding of how export strategic orientations might be related to export market learning dimensions. It is revealed that both types of orientations provide different managerial efforts individually and interactively to develop and foster exploration, exploitation and ambidexterity in export markets.

1. Introduction

Export firms aim to expand their business to new export markets while ensuring their sustainability in their current export markets (Assadinia et al., 2019, Chung, 2019). Achieving this goal can only be possible with continuous learning from both current and new export markets (Cadogan, et al., 1999, Petersen et al., 2008). Learning from these two sources appears in organizational learning literature as export market exploitation capability, which is learning from current export markets, and export market exploration capability, which is learning from new export markets, (Kyriakopoulos and Moorman, 2004, Vorhies et al., 2011). Both sets of learning capabilities are deemed crucial for exporting because exploitation capability is vital for survival and short term secure efficiency where exploration capability is vital for growth and long term success (Oyna and Alon, 2018). Due to the dynamic characteristics of international markets, export firms tend to invest in these two

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capabilities at the same time for permanent viability (Rodrigues et al., 2013). Engaging simultaneously in these two paradoxical learning is ambidexterity (March, 1991) and there has been increasing requirements for export firms to be ambidextrous in international markets.

Since learning has been recognized as vital for organizations, there have been numerous calls for studying on the factors that improve learning capability. Some of the prior researches that investigate their study on this subject assert that strategic orientations have antecedent effect on organizational learning and ambidexterity (e.g. Ramachandran et al., 2019, Sahi et al 2020, Boso et al., 2012). Two important strategic orientations are mostly addressed in international business literature; e*xport market orientation*, which reflects a firm's tendency towards export markets, and e*xport entrepreneurial orientation*, which refers to firms' proclivity to explore new market opportunities (Boso et al., 2013, Cadogan et al., 2016). Considering the literature in general, export market orientation is mostly associated with export market exploitation, and export entrepreneurial orientation is mostly associated with export market exploration (Abebe and Angriawan, 2014, Kyriakopoulos and Moorman,2004, Vorhies et al., 2011).

Several studies were conducted regarding these export market related learning capabilities but very little attention is given to them within the scope of emerging economies (Chung, 2019). Due to the increasing importance of emerging economies to the global economy, it is important for export firms to examine the specific issues of export market learning and its drivers. Moreover, besides the substantial amount of empirical work on learning among large, established business organizations, the challenge is even greater for less experienced and resource-constrained exporting SMEs from emerging economies whose interplay, influence and implications of exploratory and exploitative capabilities continue to evolve and yet remain poorly understood (Abebe and Angriawan, 2014, Sahi et al., 2020). In particular, SMEs in emerging economies can leverage exporting as a springboard to exceed the barriers of their home markets and utilize foreign market opportunities (Boso et al., 2016). Therefore, it is vital for them to understand the contribution of the strategic orientations on the mechanism of export market learning capability (Assadinia et al., 2019). This study is conducted on 291 exporting SMEs in Turkey which is an emerging economy.

Consistent with the established argument in the extant literature, the purpose of this study is to extend the on-going research concerning the relationship between strategic orientations and market learning in export extension. Besides, ambidexterity is analyzed with respect to either of these strategic orientations in most of the previous studies, but there haven’t been any studies that establish a link between the interaction effect of export strategic orientations on one hand and export market learning ambidexterity on the other. So, this study also investigates whether combined effect of export market orientation and export entrepreneurial orientation accurately impacts export market learning ambidexterity.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant theoretical foundations and develops hypotheses for relationships between the variables. The research method is then discussed which include the data collection process and analysis procedures, before presenting the results. In addition, there is a number of interesting post-hoc analyses that have important inferences to the constructs studied in this paper. Finally, implications of our findings for theory and practice are discussed in the last part.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Dependent Variables

Knowledge has been known for a long time to be essential for organizations' existence (Li and Calantone, 1998). Processing the knowledge to provide modification according to the market requirements, to refresh application methods and to reveal new values (Chiva et al., 2014) are at least as important as the knowledge itself. These changes resulting adjustment to the firm environment by processing these necessary knowledge is conceptualized as "organizational learning" (Day, 1994). Studies about organizational learning vary according to its sources as technology, market, and social sources (Yeoh, 2004). Relatedly to the export market source, the capability of an organization to develop new perspectives, to provide understanding the export market, to change its behaviors as a result of processing the export market knowledge is **Export Market Learning (XML)** which is market driven organizational learning (Hsu and Pereira, 2008). It refers to how firms attempt to understand the market they operate within and how they analyze, operationalize and disseminate the information acquired from their markets (Taheri et al., 2019). Organizational learning theory identifies two key mechanisms as exploration and exploitation (March, 1991) and in a similar vein, XML is commonly conducted through either the Export Market Exploration capability or Export Market Exploitation capability (Levitt & March, 1988, Kim and Atuahene-Gima, 2010, Lisboa et al., 2013). **Export Market Exploration** refers to the learning capability in new export markets and concerns dealing with the knowledge of new export markets that are currently unknown to the firm. The reason to indicate an effort to move away from current export markets and existing knowledge bases is the probability to have new business opportunities (Kim and Atuahene-Gima, 2010, Vorhies et al., 2011, Lisboa et al., 2013). Exploration capability can enable export firms to compete in dynamic environments via an emphasis on search for new exporting ideas, risk taking, experimentation, variation, flexibility, and innovation (Vila et al., 2015). **Export market exploitation** refers to the learning capability in current export markets, represents a path of knowledge generation and deployment that is closely related to the firm's existing knowledge bases and current organizational export routines (Kim and Atuahene-Gima, 2010, Vorhies et al., 2011, Lisboa et al., 2013). Export market exploitation allows a firm to lock in a comfortable position in the marketplace and guarantee its viability (Lisboa et al., 2013). It can lead to faster market responses and greater ability to capitalize on short-term opportunities. (Vila et al., 2015).

It is safe to do business in current markets, but it is also necessary for export firms to open up new export markets if they want to grow and develop (Imran et al., 2017). Moreover, maintaining its effectiveness only in current markets means not having alternatives when there are risks and threats that may arise in current markets. But, attention should be paid to the fact that too much new market research effort may result in the firm not being able to focus adequately on its current activities and not discovering new opportunities in current markets. On the other hand, the searches for new markets are inherent in exporting but new market pursuits will perhaps consist only of endeavors that create costs and do not turn into jobs. Therefore, the literature mainly focuses on potential competitive or complementary effects of exploration and exploitation (Birkinshaw and Gibson, 2004). Many scholars have assumed an opposing relationship and inherent tension between these capabilities (Rhee and Kim 2019). Contrary to this standard approach, it is argued that these forms need not to be contradictory processes, but they can be complementary and organizations must learn how to carry out both forms (Lewin and Volberda 1999). Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) were the first to reveal the complementary feature of these capabilities and proposed the idea of pursuing *"organizational ambidexterity"* which allows a firm to simultaneously develop exploration

and exploitation for their long-term survival and growth. In other words, learning from current markets increases the experience of the firm and can often improve a firm's effectiveness in exploring new knowledge about new markets. On the contrary, learning from new markets refreshes our perspective on current markets and will better equip firm to recognize and assimilate new knowledge or opportunities in current markets (Cao et al., 2009). There are also studies in the literature showing that these two capacities affect each other negatively. For example Rhee and Kim (2019) argued that the exploitation of existing knowledge is assumed to hinder the exploration of new knowledge because learning privileges the effects that are in the temporal and spatial neighborhood, while exploration tends to produce poorer outcomes in the short run and greater returns for higher-level systems than for the focal actor. This study is going to examine ambidexterity with combined approach and the central idea behind it is that a firm can learn in both current and new export markets which have an overall positive impact on exporting as a whole. So, **Export Market Learning Ambidexterity** in this study refers to the learning capability of a firm in both current and new export markets simultaneously (Mom et al., 2019; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013, Ramachandra et al, 2019).

Ambidexterity has been studied academically and administratively in various fields. Studies in international marketing literature have shown that ambidexterity requires substantially distinctive structures, processes, strategies, capabilities, and cultures to be implemented (He and Wong, 2004). It is seen that ambidexterity mostly interacts with firm level structural factors as orientations (market, entrepreneurial, learning, international), flexibilities (resource, coordination), decentralization, absorptive capacity etc. (Lisboa et al., 2011, Wei et al., 2014, Sahi, et al., 2020). The next section will discuss two of these factors and the hypothesis based on them.

2.2. Independent Variables and Hypothesis

Export market learning which is hypothesized to be an important "market-driven" capability (Day, 1994) has been based on learning processes from external sources related precisely to export markets (Weerawardena, 2003, Hughes and Morgan, 2007). So, export firms need to be export market oriented in nature (Cadogan et al., 2009). Besides, the weakness of an export firm's organizational capabilities is complemented by strong entrepreneurial leadership in accomplishing specific export activities such as international expansion (Keen and Wu, 2011). In this regard, export market learning is therefore consequence of some drivers that are recognized in the organizational learning literature as market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation (e.g. Cadogan et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2011, S.Kraft and Bausch, 2016). Both orientations have relations with exploration and exploitation capabilities (Abebe and Angriawan, 2014, Martins et al., 2020) because they require market learning to be operational. (Sahi et al., 2020)

This study builds on this assumption that *Export Market Orientation* and *Export Entrepreneurial Orientation* are two complementary strategic orientations and they may interact with each other to drive ambidexterity. Therefore, the concepts of these strategic orientations, their individual and combined effects on export market learning dimensions are studied in the next section.

2.2.1. Export Market Orientation and Export Market Learning Dimensions

Export Market Orientation (XMO) is noted to be reflective of a firm's general tendency towards export market customers, competitors, suppliers, distributors and other exogenous factors (Cadogan et al., 2009). It is an intangible resource emphasizing the firm's ability to

continuously absorb knowledge from key export market members in current and potential export markets while influencing the firm's ability to develop and offer superior value for its export customers (Murray et al., 2011, Jian and Zhou, 2015). XMO is posited to reflect the extent to which firms establish the satisfaction of customer needs and wants as an organizing principle of the firm (Baker and Sinkula, 2009).To better understand its mechanism, we need to take a closer look at the dimensions of XMO and their relations with export market learning. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) introduced the concept of "market orientation" to describe "the organization wide *intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination,* and *responsiveness* to market intelligence" (p.3). This study contextualizes them within the scope of export market.

Export market intelligence generation includes the activities that are used to create export market intelligence which are related to trends-changes in the export environment, the forces that influence export customers' needs and wants, and the measurement of export customer satisfaction (Chung, 2012). International markets are rich sources of information for exporters. Firms that need to learn in export markets generate their own unique information which will be the input of their market learning from these rich sources (Abebe and Angriawan, 2014). When organizations place a great deal of importance on market information for export market learning, they are more likely to acquire and use them (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993).

Export market intelligence dissemination involves a process in which market intelligence and signals are formally or informally sorted, filtered, and diffused across departments and functional areas within the organization (Kwak et al, 2013). The dispersion of information in the organization and being known at the right time by the right members of the organization are also required by export market learning. Export market learning is either possible through the learning of individuals related to export in the organization. Rather than a utopian understanding that all acquired information is learned by everyone in the organization, export market intelligence dissemination provides export market learning by delivering the necessary information to the required individuals (Cadogan et al., 2003).

Export market responsiveness represents the formulation and implementation of all responses towards the intelligence that has been collected, generated and disseminated within the exporting firms. It reflects the speed and coordination with which the changes are anticipated and actions are implemented and periodically reviewed (Kwak et al., 2013). It is an impetus to learning and an instruction on what to learn, because, a firm must learn in export markets in order to better respond to export market requirements and to seize opportunities. It means, the more a firm has orientation of responsiveness, the more it tends to learn in export markets (Ramachandran et al., 2019).

This study contends that XMO has an impact on export market learning because of the fact that it is necessary for export firms to establish XMO which provides an excellent pathway to the implementation of export market learning (Slater and Narver, 1995, Jian and Zhou, 2015). Therefore, it is asserted that;

H1. There is a significant and positive relationship between export market orientation and export market learning.

Although export markets are technically similar, they differ from each other in terms of structural, geographical, cultural etc. aspects and the success of the firms in export markets can be achieved by being aware of these differences and market requirements. Since new export markets are those in which firms do not operate yet, the main focus of the firms will be on the information concerning market entry context such as recognizing the new export

markets, understanding the potential customer expectations, learning about the competitors and calculating the probability of achieving investment objectives. Each time the new information is processed, it will contribute to the learning capability of the firm and this expanding capability encourages leaning towards new markets. So, being more export market oriented brings more tendencies to learn in new export markets.

The literature indicates how market orientation can effectively play in fostering exploration or exploitation. Abebe and Angriawan (2014) stated that there is a statistically significant positive relationship between market orientation and exploration activities. Peng et al (2019) stated that market orientation fosters an organizational culture and enables exploration to create and deliver superior customer values. Ghantous and Alnawas (2020) emprically tested that market orientation has impact on exploration. Therefore;

H1a (XMO – Exploration) There is a significant and positive relationship between export market orientation and export market exploration.

It is easy to reach accurate market knowledge in current export markets and to present the necessary information within the firm to those engaged in export activities. Because the firm is already operating in current export markets and the environment that the export activities take place is already known by the firm. However, due to the dynamic nature of international markets, there is also a possibility of differentiation in the export environment. Since the main purpose of the export firms in the current markets is sustainability and more market share, it is necessary to renew information at regular intervals and to be aware of the conditions that remain the same and change. XMO enables firms to immediately respond to changes by processing accurate information in order to ensure customer satisfaction and improve export activities. Export market-oriented firms are prone to learn about their customers' expressed and latent needs because they prioritize the acquisition, sharing and usage of export customer intelligence (Srivastava et al., 2001, Boso et al., 2018). Also they are fast learners because these firms anticipate market requirements ahead of their competitors (Lisboa et al., 2011). In another words, being more current export market oriented means more learning processes take place in the current export markets.

Siren et al. (2012) argued for the usefulness of research into market orientation, given its emphasis on knowledge acquisition and exploitation. Boso et al. (2012) suggested that market orientation focuses primarily to gather existing market intelligence and it emphasizes knowledge acquisition, with a bias towards exploitation. S.Kraft and Bausch (2016) empirically tested that exploitation is primarily effected by market orientation among other strategic orientations. Therefore;

H1b. (XMO – Exploitation) There is a significant and positive relationship between export market orientation and export market exploitation

This study suggests that export market-oriented firms not only strive to satisfy current customer needs, but they also actively seek to identify and fulfill future customer needs in potential export markets, so they aimed to have information from both current and new customers simultaneously. Besides, export firms process the knowledge concerning not only the customers but also the distributors, competitors and other market members from both current and new markets. Every acquired and processed knowledge, regardless of the market type, contributes positively to the learning in the other market type. Market orientation is an organizational culture wherein exploration and exploitation merge to create a complementary versus trade-off relationship (Peng et al., 2019). Atuahene-Gima et al. (2005), Menguc and Auh (2006), Jansen et al. (2006) demonstrated that XMO enhances an organization's capability to engage in both exploration and exploitation at the same time. Ramachandran et

al. (2019) suggested that higher levels of the three XMO dimensions are likely to engender higher levels of exploration and exploitation simultaneously. Therefore;

H1c. (XMO – Ambidexterity) There is a significant and positive relationship between export market orientation and export market learning ambidexterity

2.2.2. Export Entrepreneurial Orientation and Export Market Learning Dimensions

Export Entrepreneurial Orientation (XEO) is often conceptualized to be reflective of a firm's general proclivity to discover and take advantage of export market opportunities as an organizing principle of the export firm (Baker and Sinkula, 2009, Lisboa et al., 2011). It implies a high level of corporate risk aversion, independent activity, commitment to innovation, reacting positively and aggressively to competitors within the market (Sahi et al., 2020). Rodrigues et al, (2013) indicate that XEO constitutes a capability that allows initiating change, pursuing new business ventures, and recognizing international opportunities. In this context it should be stated that XEO correlates to but differs from XMO, hence, while XMO emphasizes customer and competitor intelligence, XEO is largely driven by untapped export market opportunities (Abebe and Angriawan, 2014). It stimulates the acknowledgment and enactment of innovative, creativity, proactive behavior that encourage learning (Zhao et al., 2011). To better understand the relation, it is needed to discuss the dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation. XEO is comprised following three primary dimensions which are *risk taking, innovativeness, proactiveness* in the literature and this study contextualizes them within the scope of export market.

The *risk-taking* dimension of XEO is often characterized as making large resource commitments or incurring large debts to export projects with uncertain outcomes that bear a danger of costly failure (Hughes et al, 2018). It entails decision making in uncertain environments and dynamic markets without complete information about relevant (internal and external) variables and the relationships among these variables (Kwak et al., 2013). Consequently, risk-taking is typically associated with exploration activities as they involve experimentation and uncertain returns. However, risk taking could also apply to exploitation capabilities because the rapid volatility of export markets can also open up new opportunities worth taking risks in current export markets (Ramachandran et al., 2019).

The *innovativeness* dimension of XEO involves a firm's willingness and tendency to generate new ideas, to develop creative processes, being open to unusual solutions (Kwak et al., 2013, Semrau et al., 2016). Therefore, while innovativeness directly relates to exploration because of the willingness to depart from an established trajectory, it also contribute to exploitation through such activities as building upon existing knowledge, broadening current skills and improving established designs or capitalizing on reengineering initiatives (Levinthal and March, 1993, Lisboa et al., 2011, Jansen et al., 2006).

The proactiveness dimension of XEO is a forward-looking perspective to running the export business in which the firm seeks out opportunities that may be related to either enhancing current operations or identifying new initiatives (Reijonen et al., 2015, Hughes et al., 2018). So, entrepreneurial orientation is compatible with both the play and discovery features of exploration and refinement, efficiency, and execution features of exploitation (Sahi et al., 2020).

This study contends that XEO has an impact on export market learning dimensions because of the fact that it leads the information processing of firms' export markets and uses a network of ties in the same way as export market learning does to seek new knowledge about current and new export markets (Reagans and McEvily, 2003, Rodrigues et al., 2013). Therefore, it is asserted that;

H2. There is a significant and positive relationship between export entrepreneurial orientation and export market learning.

In order to run the learning process in new export markets, it is necessary to examine the entry and investment opportunities for those markets and to reach the necessary information about them. Since the firm has not previously operated in new export markets, the level of uncertainty is very high and new export market entry can only be achieved by taking risks. Innovative marketing components that differ from the existing competitors help export firms to gain customers in new markets. In other words, all these activities require entrepreneurial skills. Also, firm's ability to see and seize opportunities in new markets is highly related to the level of its entrepreneurial focus. The more a firm is export entrepreneurial oriented, the more information and learning take place in new export markets. (Mantok et al., 2019)

According to the general concurrence in the literature, Zhao et al. (2011) concluded that new market experiences gained due to entrepreneurial orientation can be synthesized into the firm's knowledge base to gain competitive advantage. Wang (2008) reported that entrepreneurial firms promote learning through the capability of exploration. Sahi et al. (2020) stated that entrepreneurial orientation with exploration creates a unique strategic resource for the firm. Therefore;

H2a. (XEO – Exploration) There is a significant and positive relationship between export entrepreneurial orientation and export market exploration

Although XEO is more often associated with exploration learning in the literature (e.g. Hughes and Morgan., 2007, Dover and Dierk, 2010, Hitt et al., 2011), XEO can act as a basis for the export market exploitation capability (Lisboa et al., 2011) because of the fact that the competition in the current export markets is still intense (Martin and Javalgi, 2016). In order to be permanent in the export market in which they are currently operating and to increase their market share, export firms aim to improve their current export activities and to make their customers more satisfied. For this reason, entrepreneurial skills are required to seize the opportunities that arise in this market, where they already know the structure and have movement expertise. This, in turn, will feed the learning processes in that market with the experiences they have gained from the current market while planning and performing each entrepreneurial activity.

This study asserts that the more an export firm has XEO the more it tends to learn in current export markets. Lisboa et al. (2011) empirically tested that EO is related positively to overseas market exploitation capability. Sahi et al (2020) reached the results that entrepreneurial orientation is significantly related to exploitation capabilities. According to the empirical studies of Ghantous and Alnawas (2020) and Martin et al. (2020), the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and exploitation capability is insignificant. Therefore;

H2b. (XEO – Exploitation) There is a significant and positive relationship between export entrepreneurial orientation and export market exploitation.

One of the main goals of export firms is to operate in even more export markets. For this reason, while carrying out export activities in current markets, they are always in search of new ones. Entrepreneurial oriented export firms tend to maintain a continuous environmental scanning both in current and potential export markets that enables them to better adapt to changes and trends, and to seize opportunities in export markets (Ahuja and Lampert, 2001). Being export entrepreneurial oriented firm is considered as an essential managerial method to support export market learning because export entrepreneurial oriented firms are more

capable of being open to the progress and this is important in terms of learning-related complexities when an organization acts in foreign markets (Hina et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurial orientation enables firms to improve their development of exploration and exploitation capabilities simultaneously (Chen et al., 2012). Sahi et al. (2020) claimed that entrepreneurial oriented firms promote ambidexterity by facilitating learning, accepting failure, and ensuring proper integration and transfer of knowledge. The results of their study revealed that entrepreneurial orientation has significant and positive impacts on ambidexterity. Mehrabi et al. (2019) empirically tested the link between entrepreneurial orientation and market learning ambidexterity and proved it. Ramachandran et al. (2019) presented the relation between all dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation and ambidexterity, and entrepreneurial orientation is found to be positively related to ambidexterity. Therefore;

H2c. (XEO – Ambidexterity) There is a significant and positive relationship between export entrepreneurial orientation and export market learning ambidexterity

2.2.3. Combined Export Strategic Orientations and Export Market Learning Ambidexterity

Organizational Learning perspective theorizes that Export Market Orientation and Export Entrepreneurial Orientation share common elements and mutually supportive (Gonzalez-Benito et al., 2009, Pehrsson, 2020). Export market orientation provides strong awareness and real-time connectivity to customer problems, a clearer understanding of competitive offerings, knowledge of environmental dynamics and constituting a major source of market opportunity information (Baker and Sinkula, 2009). Export entrepreneurial orientation provides development of new methods and processes to discover about current and new export markets and their opportunities (Baker and Sinkula, 2009). Slater and Narver (1995) view entrepreneurial orientation as a complement to market orientation and Grinstein (2008) suggests that market orientation provides an effective vehicle to achieve entrepreneurial activities. Grinstein (2008) also argues that researches on strategic orientation should divert its focus from analyzing the effect of a single strategic orientation to the combined effect of strategic orientations because there is a greater probability that doing more of one orientation may increase the value of doing more of the other (Boso et al., 2013). In line with these suggestions, studies by Baker and Sinkula (2009) and Gonzalez-Benito et al. (2009) have adopted combined forms of strategic orientations and verified that it is better to study the combined effect of strategic orientation than using a fragmented approach focused on a single orientation. Creating a market orientation is only the start for an export firm to maximize its capability to learn (Morgan and Berthon, 2008), and “market orientation can achieve maximum effectiveness only if it is complemented by a spirit of entrepreneurship” (Slater and Narver, 1995) and organizations employ aspects of MO and EO simultaneously (Pehrsson, 2020). Soto-Acosta et al., (2018) suggested that SMEs have better results if they build their strategies on multiple strategic orientations.

The synergy arising from being both export market and entrepreneurial oriented, enables firms to engage in export activities and initiatives focusing on current and new markets at the same time. The alignment of these strategic orientations provides organizations with a complementary cluster of knowledge acquisition and utilization capabilities that could foster simultaneous engagement in both exploitation and exploration (Atuahene-Gima and Ko, 2001, Wales et al., 2013). It ensures that the firm is organizationally ambidextrous and this synergy triggers a learning process in both current and new export markets at the same time. Boso et al. (2012) declaired that both orientations are viewed as market-based resources that

offer firms the capability to simultaneously explore and exploit new opportunities in export markets. Rodrigues et al. (2013) posits that market and entrepreneurial orientation combination is superior in generating learning capabilities in exporting. Sahi et al. (2020) proposed that ambidexterity is affected by market and entrepreneurial orientation. Therefore;

H3. There is a significant and positive relationship between interactive export strategic orientations and export market learning ambidexterity

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection and Sample

The empirical context for this study is Turkey based export SMEs which have at least 7 years export experience, and have more than 25 employees. The reason to exclude less experienced firms is being prone to the liability of newness and their perception about international environment and the reason to exclude the firms with less than 25 employees is the lack of network of ties and resources that may prevent very small firms from developing diverse capabilities (Mehrabi et al., 2019). Based on the information from previous survey-based studies in Turkey, it is always estimated that a quarter of the firms in the list would be eligible to participate in the studies. A number of past ambidexterity studies have successfully employed a sample size around 250 firms which well influence the power of the studies to draw significant results and conclusions (e.g. Abebe et al., 2014, Hughes et al., 2018, Sahi et al., 2020), thus, it was aimed to carry out this study with the participation of at least 250 export SMEs.

According to the report of The Turkish Exporters' Association (Istanbul, 2021), the number of export SMEs in Turkey is around 50.000 (13.000 medium-sized and 37.000 small-sized). A list of 1.000 export SMEs among 50.000 was filtered by making use of the algorithm in the computer program developed by The Turkish Exporters' Association for their own statistical studies. The feature of the list was as follows; (a) Firms which were selected randomly from each city of Turkey (b) the rate of being included in the list will be the ratio of the number of exporting SMEs in the city to the number of exporting SMEs in Turkey as a whole, (c) Firms which have at least 25 employees, (d) Firms with 7 years export experience.

A survey method was employed for data collection and questionnaire was sent to the senior managers/owners of the firms via both mail and e-mail. A total of 307 responses (78 via mail, 233 via e-mail) were received over four weeks by sending reminder e-mails twice and 291 responses were usable.

3.2. Measures

This study adopted well established measures from existing literature and 5 point likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was used in the questionnaire. The scales and their psychometric properties for constructs in the hypothesized relationships, as well as several control variables, are described below.

There are three dependent variables in the study; export market exploration, export market exploitation and export market learning ambidexterity. Exploration and exploitation comprise 5 items each which were taken from Lisboa et al., (2013). Regarding Gibson and Birkinshaw’s study (2004) ambidexterity is multiplicative (interactive) term of exploration and exploitation. Before multiplying, they were mean-centered to avoid multicollinearity problem. Independent Variables are also three; export market orientation, export entrepreneurial orientation and combined strategic orientation. Export market orientation is

generally measured with three sets of questions pertaining to intelligence generation, dissemination and responsiveness. This study adopted all 11 items of these subdimensions from Boso et al. (2012) to form export market orientation measure. 3 items of dissemination scale were reverse questions and needed to be adjusted according to others. Export Entrepreneurial Orientation measured in the literature also based on three sets of questions concerning risk taking, proactiveness and innovativeness. The measures of these subdimensions are adopted from another study of Boso et al. (2013). There were 3 items in risk taking measure and they had high loadings in their own scale but when examining them in one variable as export entrepreneurial orientation, their loadings are very low. Due to the need to add questions of risk taking to the variable, 2 items remained and one is excluded. Combined strategic orientation variable is formed by the same multiplying method with ambidexterity and export market orientation and export entrepreneurial orientations were also mean-centered before multiplying. The literature suggests using control variable(s) in the analysis to measure possible effects of extraneous factors on the relationships examined in the study (Vorhies et al., 2011). Export experience which is associated with export studies is the controlling variable in this study.

4. Analysis and Results

This research involves studying associations among latent and directly observed constructs. As such, structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized to test the hypotheses. Several analyses were run to validate the measurement model before the structural equation modeling, thus the analysis and interpretation of the model were carried out in two stages as measurement model and structural equation model.

4.1. Measurement Model

First of all, the scale structure was created with the explanatory factor analysis (EFA) for the variable scales via SPSS 22.0 and internal consistency analysis was performed to determine whether there is any inconvenience in using the scales in the study. The suitability of the data for factor analysis can be examined with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) coefficient and the Barlett Sphericity test. The KMO value is used to determine whether the sample correlation is large enough to ensure its reliability. Values close to 1 indicate the convenience of the sample correlation, and values below 0.5 indicate inconvenience (Klein, G., 2013). The significance value of the Barlett Sphericity test should be less than 0.05 (Klein, G., 2013). In addition, the scale expressions must provide the univariate normality hypothesis and it is evaluated by looking at the skewness and kurtosis coefficients whether the values are between +2.0 and -2.0 (George and Mallery, 2010). As a result, it was determined that all of the scale expressions were within the specified ranges and there were univariate normality with no extreme values. After understanding that the sample size was sufficient (KMO = 0.933) and the Barlett Sphericity test was also significant ($\chi 2=3376,684$ $p < 0,001$), the results of EFA is shown at Table 1. The scales used in the survey, loadings of the items, KMO values of each variable and the measurement model are found in the table. One item from intelligence generation, one item from innovativeness and one item from risk taking scale was excluded because of very low loadings.

The variables which are preferred as data collection tools, consist of 28 items in total, and the results of the reliability analysis according to the answers given to the scales are in Table 2. These values show that the scales are reliable and there is no obstacle to use them in the analysis.

Table 1.
Exploratory Factor Analysis

ALL FACTORS KMO: 0,933	**Items**	**Factor Loading**
Export Market Orientation (Boso et al 2012) KMO : 0,867	**Intelligence Generation**	
	We periodically review the likely effect of changes in our export environment (e.g. regulations, technology)	0,686
	We constantly monitor our level of commitment and orientation to serving export customer needs	0,708
	We are fast to detect fundamental shifts in our export environment (e.g. regulation, technology, economy)	0,615
	Intelligence Dissemination	
	Information that can influence the way we serve our export customers takes few time to reach export personnel	0,597
	Important information about our export customers is conveyed to the relevant personnel/manager without any loss in the intra-company communication chain.	0,457
	Information about our export competitors' activities often reaches relevant personnel in time.	0,720
Export Entrepreneurial Orientation (Boso et al 2013) KMO : 0,860	**Responsiveness**	
	If a major competitor were to launch an intensive campaign targeted at our foreign customers, we would implement a response immediately	0,752
	We are quick to respond to significant changes in our competitors' price structures in foreign markets	0,785
	We rapidly respond to competitive actions that threaten us in our export markets	0,555
	Innovativeness	
	Our company is known as an innovator among businesses in our industry.	0,680
	We promote new, innovative product/services in our company	0,787
	Our company provides leadership in developing new products/services	0,484
	Our company is constantly experimenting with new products/services	0,443
	Risk Taking	
	Top managers of our company, in general, tend to invest in high-risk projects.	0,554
	This company shows a great deal of tolerance for high risk projects.	0,846
Export Market Exploration (Lisboa et al 2013) KMO: 0,840	**Proactiveness**	
	We seek to exploit anticipated changes in our export market ahead of our rivals	0,728
	We seize initiatives whenever possible in our target market operations	0,687
	We act opportunistically to shape the export environment in which we operate	0,667
	We identify prospective customers	0,729
	We acquire export market-related information about new markets	0,440
	We assess the potential of new markets	0,642
	We build customer relationships in new markets	0,753
	We build new overseas distributor relationships	0,691
Export Market Exploitation (Lisboa et al 2013) KMO: 0,843	We enhance the capture of important market information about current markets	0,738
	We reinforce contacts in current export markets	0,622
	We reinforce the monitoring of competitive products in current export markets	0,715
	We reinforce relationships with current overseas customers	0,685
	We reinforce overseas distributor relationships	0,558

Table 2.
Reliability

	Cronbah's Alpha	N
4 Factors Model	0,932	28
Export Market Orientation	0,836	9
Export Entrepreneurial Orientations	0,830	9
Export Market Exploration	0,835	5
Export Market Exploitation	0,824	5

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted via AMOS 22.0 to assess the discriminatory validity of research variables and the variables are different from one another and represent distinct constructs. The fitness of the four-factor measurement model is as follows; the chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi 2/df$ = 592,034 / 344 = 1,721), the goodness of fit index (GFI=0.873), the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI=0,850), the root mean square error approximation (RMSEA=0.050), the root mean square residual (RMR=0,038), and the standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR= 0,0503). The comparison indicators of the model: the normed fit index (NFI=0,831), the relative fit index (RFI=0,814), and the compared fit index (CFI=0,921). The parsimony indicators of the model: the expected cross-validation index (ECVI=2,469) and the consistent Akaike information criterion (CAIC= 1005,780) (Browne and Cudeck, 1993; Bryne, 2001; Kline, 1998).

Correlations between the variables are shown at Table 3. The highest correlation score is 0,673 (< 0.750), indicating there were no high correlation between any of two variables. The variance inflation factors (VIF) are also controlled and found no confounding effects among the variables (highest VIF is 2,158), so multicollinearity is not likely to bias the data. Actually, for the next part of the analysis, mean-centralizing was performed for interactive variables to avoid multicollinearity problem.

Table 3.
Correlations

Variables	XMO	XEO	EXPLORATION	EXPLOITATION
XMO	1,000			
XEO	0,673	1,000		
EXPLORATION	0,609	0,630	1,000	
EXPLOITATION	0,635	0,600	0,635	1,000

Correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed)

4.2. Structural Equation Model

The results of the structural equation analyses are presented in Table 4. Export market orientation (XMO), entrepreneurial orientation (XEO) and the interaction effect between them (XMOxXEO) are shown as independent variables. Control variable and the relationships between the independent variables are also shown in the table. Export Market Exploration, Exploitation and Ambidexterity are dependent variables presented in the table. Model Zero indicates the relation between control variable and dependent variables. Export market orientation and export entrepreneurial orientation are included in Model 1, ambidexterity as a third dependent variable is included in Model 2 and all variables with their interaction effects are presented in Model 3.

Moreover, in the ambidexterity literature, analysis methods for ambidexterity vary according to the conceptual approach; some researchers use the addition method and take the sum of the

variables for total effect, some researchers subtract to isolate the intersection effect, and some researchers take variables' product to measure the joint effect (Cao et al., 2009; Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; He and Wong, 2004). This study conceptualizes ambidexterity with interaction perspective and uses the product of exploration and exploitation variables.

Table 4.
Structural Equation in AMOS

SEM	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2			Model 3		
	Exploration	Exploitation	Exploration	Exploitation	Exploration	Exploitation	Ambidexterity	Exploration	Exploitation	Ambidexterity
Export Experience	0,013**	0,014**	0,006*	0,008*	0,006*	0,008*	0,007*	0,006*	0,008*	0,006*
XMO			0,289***	0,421***	0,291***	0,423***	-0,144*	0,301***	0,429***	NS
XEO			0,454***	0,328***	0,455***	0,329***	-0,282*	0,445***	0,324***	NS
(XMO x XEO)										0,692***
XMO <-->XEO			0,266***		0,264***			0,263***		
XMO <-->(XMO x XEO)								- 0,188***		
XEO <-->(XMO x XEO)								- 0,147***		
x² / sd	4,694		1,690		1,678			1,623		
RMSEA	0,113		0,049		0,048			0,046		
GFI	0,906		0,870		0,867			0,867		
AGFI	0,855		0,848		0,844			0,844		
CFI	0,861		0,918		0,916			0,925		

NS: not significant p <0.001 *** p <0.005 ** p <0.05 *

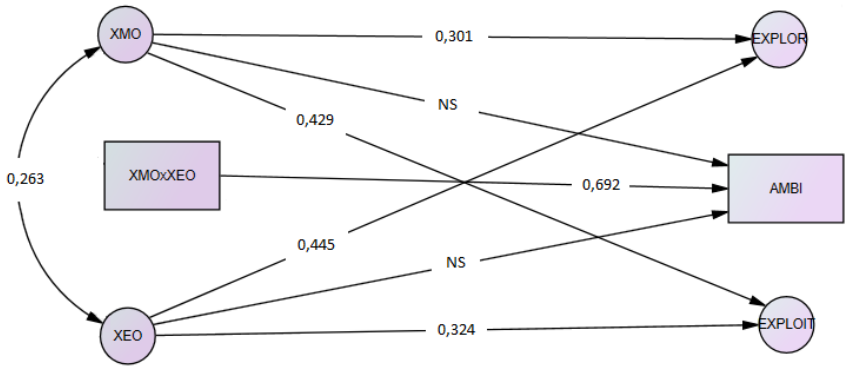

Figure 1. Relations between variables

The hypothesis H1 posits that export market orientation has impact on export market learning dimensions. According to the results, it is determined that XMO predicted the exploration perception of the participants positively and significantly in three models so H1a is supported for all models. If we look at the relation between XMO and exploitation, we can see XMO

has impact on exploration positively and significantly in three models, so H1b is also supported for three models. Besides, in line with the widely accepted opinion in the literature, XMO is more closely related to exploitation than exploration. H1c proposes the positive impact of XMO on ambidexterity but the result surprisingly shows a statistically significant but negative impact in model 2 and the relation is insignificant in model 3, so H1c is not supported.

The hypothesis H2 comprises the positive linear effect of Export Entrepreneurial Orientation on export market learning dimensions. H2a conducts the impact of XEO on exploration and there are positively significant linear relations in all models, so H2a is supported. We also see the linear direct impact of XEO on exploitation in every models and H2b is supported too. In line with the widespread opinion in the literature, it is reported that XEO is more effective on exploration than exploitation. H2c proposes the positive linear relation between XEO and ambidexterity but we achieved the same results in EEO as in XMO. XEO is found to have negative effect on ambidexterity in model 2 and insignificant relation in model 3, so H2c is not supported.

The hypothesis H3 is supported with a high degree of positive significant relation level (0,692). This is an expected result of this study because these new variables, which are both formed to be interactive, have the same structural properties that affect each other. So, the interactive effects of strategic orientations have linear positive significant impact on ambidexterity; H3 is supported.

Besides, it is indicated in the table that there is a significant positive relationship between XMO and XEO which are approximately the same level in all models. It is also reported in this analysis that XMO and XEO have negative impact on their own interaction effect (XMOxXEO). We see in the model 2 that independent variables XMO and XEO affect ambidexterity negatively but when their interaction effect is added to the model 3, their impacts on ambidexterity become insignificant. Lastly, concerning control variable export experience, it has very small positive impact on export market exploration, exploitation and ambidexterity in every model.

5. Discussion and Implications

This study handles ambidexterity as a synergy of two export market learning capabilities; exploration and exploitation. Simultaneous implementation of export market exploration and exploitation is mentioned in the literature that it is definitively playing a key role in exporting (Sahi et al., 2020). According to the results, this study recommends that weakness of an export firm's organizational capability can be complemented by another organizational capability in accomplishing specific export activities (Keen and Wu, 2011), therefore, export SMEs should attempt to develop mechanisms and behaviors to experience ambidextrous learning implementations in terms of export markets. In this respect, this study agrees with the researchers (e.g. Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004, Kim and Gima, 2010, Sarkees et al, 2010, Voss and Voss, 2013, Sahi et al., 2020) who suggested that ambidextrous structure of the firm encourages and supports management efforts to maximize cross-function coordination and results in survival through exploitation and growth through exploration.

The literature asserts that export market learning capabilities can only be carried out together with some of the firm level drivers (Gomes and Wojahn, 2017). Substantial body of previous researches has suggested market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation as drivers of organizational learning (e.g. Ramachandran et al., 2019, Sahi et al., 2020, Boso et al., 2012). In line with these researchers, the results of this study confirmed that export strategic orientations have impact on exploration and exploitation in export markets and, revealed that

both types of orientations provide different managerial efforts to develop and foster exploration and exploitation. As stated in previous researches (e.g. Hughes and Morgan, 2007; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008, Hitt et al., 2011, Wang, 2008, Zhao et al., 2011, Siren et al., 2012), the results in this study showed that export market orientation is significantly more related to exploitation than exploration while export entrepreneurial orientation is significantly more related to exploration than exploitation. Therefore, export SMEs which aim to gain safe/secure returns and to ensure their sustainability in current export markets should invest in their export market orientation more than entrepreneurial orientation. Besides, export SMEs whose target is being able to analyze the characteristics of export markets, to evaluate the market opportunities, and to enter new export markets should invest in their export entrepreneurial orientation more than market orientation. It is approved in this study that being export market oriented and entrepreneurial oriented are vital abilities for SMEs to process export activities, but, being solely market oriented or solely entrepreneurial oriented may cause negative effect on SMEs who want to profit ambidextrous advantages of export market exploration and exploitation.

Empirical researches have continuously stated a significant correlation between MO and EO. Baker and Sinkula, (2009) reported that *"A common bond between EO and MO is the priority that both place on learning. Learning about customers and markets appears to be prerequisite to both a strong MO and EO and is likely to at least partially drive their moderate correlation."* This inference is also understood from the results of this study as export market orientation and export entrepreneurial orientation have impacts on each other and the investment made in one has positive contribution to another. Therefore, if it is considered by the exporters that the improvement to be made in one of the orientations will contribute positively to the other, it will be deemed worthwhile to invest more in the orientations.

On the other hand, the interaction form of export market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation is created by using the same approach as ambidexterity and it is examined whether their interaction effect impacts on export market learning ambidexterity. Atuahene-Gima and Ko (2001), Rodrigues et al. (2013), Kraft and Bausch (2016) posit that market and entrepreneurial orientation combination is superior in generating learning capabilities. Agreeing with these researchers, the models were analyzed sequentially by adding one more variable each time and the results demonstrate that the interaction effect of strategic orientations has a great impact on ambidexterity which is also an interaction effect of exploration and exploitation. This is because; export strategic orientations and export market learning capabilities share common underlying dimensions and facilitate each other's implementation (Gonzalez-Benito et al., 2009). They have mutually in need of each other for their application (Boso et al., 2018). The more export market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation are well implemented, the more they interactively drive export market exploration, exploitation and ambidexterity (S.Kraft and Bausch, 2016). Therefore, the interaction effect arising from these two orientations can ensure the existence and sustainability of export SMEs in current and new export markets.

However, there is insufficient understanding of how to determine the proportion of export market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation in their interaction form. This study suggests export SMEs to decide the implementation weight of export market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation according to the implementation weight of market exploration and exploitation. For an intended improvement in current export markets, there is a need for learning in those markets, and the effectiveness of this learning can be achieved by being more market oriented. Likewise, when new markets are in question, there will be a need for market learning of those markets. Learning capability can be increased by being more export

entrepreneurial oriented to enter new markets and evaluate opportunities in there. This time, determining the weight of learning in new and current export markets becomes a current issue. Then, export firms should determine the weight of market exploration and exploitation according to the market requirements and export-related growth purposes.

In 2021, more than one-third (36.4) of the total exports in Turkey were realized by export SMEs and this rate can be improved by the governmental supports to export SMEs. This study further contributes policy makers to gain a better understanding of ambidexterity implementation necessity for export SMEs. Compared to large firms, export SMEs can devote less budget and time for market learning. Given that export SMEs' resources are scarce; the underlying question is how to learn more effectively to expand their business to new export markets while ensuring their sustainability in their current export markets. Implementing ambidexterity and improving the drivers that affect ambidexterity should be taken into consideration while creating the governmental supports provided to export SMES.

6. Conclusion

Drawing upon organizational learning literature, the results of this study extend the development of international marketing literature by examining the relationship between strategic orientations and ambidexterity. The empirical analysis realized in the study was based on 291 exporting SMEs located in Turkey which is an emerging economy.

This study aimed to show that market orientation and entrepreneurial orientation of an exporting SME create an interaction effect which well fit with export market learning ambidexterity of the firm. In other words, the relationship between two interaction effects is studied and a great impact from combined effect of strategic orientations to ambidexterity is examined. It can be concluded as; export firms, pursuing both surviving and growing internationally, may change the weight of market exploration and exploitation in ambidexterity according to the requirements of current and new export markets by changing the weight of market and entrepreneurial orientations in their interaction effect.

There are some limitations of this study that need to be considered and may provide several opportunities for future researches. Firstly, the research object of this study is limited to the export firms only in Turkey. Cross-national studies should be conducted to achieve the overall structure of the relationships and country effects should be taken into consideration. Secondly, even though a direct correlation between strategic orientations and export market learning dimensions was found, some moderators and mediators between the variables should also be examined. Future researches may explore the complexity of the relationship between these variables. Thirdly, the complementary effect of only two orientations is handled in this study, however, there are likely to be other orientations in the literature that may be related to export market learning and they have to be explored in future researches.

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