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**A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW:
EXPORT BARRIER IN INTERNATIONALIZATION
OF AGRO-FOOD SMES**

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Abstract:

The internationalisation of agro-food small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is increasingly constrained by multifaceted export barriers that limit their competitiveness in emerging markets. Despite their vital role in sustaining economic growth and food security, agro-food SMEs often encounter institutional, managerial, and technological challenges that hinder their ability to expand abroad. This study systematically reviews the existing literature to identify and synthesise the key barriers shaping the export performance of agro-food SMEs. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol, a rigorous search was conducted across two major databases, Scopus and EconBiz. The identification and screening process yielded 28 primary studies that met the inclusion criteria. Through thematic analysis of these studies, three overarching themes emerged: (1) institutional and environmental contexts shaping SME exporting, encompassing regulatory constraints, trade policies, and market volatility; (2) firm-level capabilities, finance, and managerial cognition, highlighting issues related to resource scarcity, limited managerial expertise, and financial barriers; and (3) networks, linkages, and digital/supply-chain technologies as enablers, emphasising the role of collaborative partnerships, innovation, and digitalisation in overcoming structural barriers. The findings underscore that export barriers

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are not isolated but interdependent, with institutional weaknesses amplifying firm-level limitations, while network and technological advancements serve as critical mitigating mechanisms. This review contributes to the understanding of export dynamics in agro-food SMEs by integrating insights across contexts and offering a framework that informs policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to enhance SME internationalisation strategies.

Keywords:

Export; Export Barriers; Export Performance; Internal Barriers; External Barriers

Introduction

The internationalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the agro-food sector is crucial for growth and competitiveness in the global market. These SMEs play a vital role in many economies, driving innovation, employment, and economic development. However, the journey to international markets is fraught with numerous barriers that can hinder their progress. Understanding these barriers is essential for developing strategies that help SMEs overcome challenges and successfully internationalise. This paper aims to explore the export barriers faced by agro-food SMEs and provide insights into the factors influencing their internationalisation process.

Literature Review

The internationalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in the agro-food sector, has been extensively studied. This research reveals a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities. One primary barrier identified is the lack of managerial competencies and resources, which are crucial for navigating foreign markets (Sannegadu et al., 2024; Ilkevich, 2024; Narayanan, 2015). SMEs often struggle with limited financial resources, which restrict their ability to invest in necessary infrastructure and market research (Forte & Salomé Moreira, 2018; Alkhalailah et al., 2024a). Furthermore, the high costs associated with compliance to international standards and regulations pose significant hurdles (Danse & Vellema, 2005; Pellegrini et al., 2023). Environmental barriers, such as political instability and economic fluctuations in target markets, significantly hinder the internationalisation efforts of SMEs (Sannegadu et al., 2024; Alkhalailah et al., 2024a). These external factors create an unpredictable business environment, making it challenging for SMEs to establish a stable presence in foreign markets. Furthermore, the lack of access to reliable market information and networks further exacerbates these challenges (Leonidou, 2004; Al-Hyari et al., 2012).

The role of social and ethnic networks has been highlighted as a significant factor in facilitating the internationalisation of agro-food SMEs. Studies have shown that these networks can provide valuable insider knowledge and reduce market entry barriers (Valdés, 2024). For example, in Latin America, familial and cultural connections have been instrumental in helping SMEs navigate foreign markets and establish business partnerships (Caiazza et al., 2016). Similarly, the importance of consolidators in the global supply chain has been emphasised, as they can help SMEs manage logistics and distribution more effectively (Caiazza et al., 2016). Technological advancements and digitalisation offer new avenues for SMEs to overcome

traditional barriers. The adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT) has enabled SMEs to reach international markets more efficiently and cost-effectively (Mariussen & Ndlovu, 2012). However, integrating new technologies also presents challenges, particularly for SMEs with limited resources and technical expertise (Pellegrini et al., 2023).

Table 1: Summary of Previous Studied

Barrier Type	Description	Supporting Abstracts
Managerial Competency	Lack of skills and knowledge to navigate foreign markets	(Sannegadu et al., 2024a)(Ilkevich, 2024)(Narayanan, 2015)
Financial Constraints	Limited financial resources for investment in internationalization	(Forte & Salomé Moreira, 2018) (Alkhalailah et al., 2024a)
Compliance Costs	High costs associated with meeting international standards and regulations	(Danse & Vellema, 2005)(Pellegrini et al., 2023)
Environmental Barriers	Political instability and economic fluctuations in target markets	(Sannegadu et al., 2024a)(Alkhalailah et al., 2024a)
Market Information	Lack of access to reliable market information and networks	(Leonidou, 2004) (Al-Hyari et al., 2012)
Social and Ethnic Networks	Familial and cultural connections facilitating market entry	(Valdés, 2024)
Role of Consolidators	Importance of intermediaries in managing logistics and distribution	(Caiazza et al., 2016) (Caiazza, 2016)
Technological Challenges	Difficulties in adopting and integrating new technologies	(Pellegrini et al., 2023) (Mariussen & Ndlovu, 2012)

Source: Scopus

In conclusion, the internationalisation of agro-food SMEs is a multifaceted process influenced by a variety of internal and external barriers. Internal challenges include managerial competencies, financial constraints, and compliance costs. External obstacles include environmental barriers and a lack of market information. Social and ethnic networks, along with the role of consolidators, can provide critical support in overcoming these barriers. Technological advancements offer new opportunities but also require SMEs to adapt and innovate. Addressing these barriers through targeted strategies and support mechanisms is essential for enhancing the international competitiveness of agro-food SMEs.

Research Question

The planning stage of an SLR, specifying research questions (RQs) is regarded as the most critical task, since it determines the methodological trajectory of the review (Kitchenham, 2007) In this study, the PICO framework a mnemonic style proposed by (Lockwood et al., 2015) for structuring research questions in qualitative research was applied. PICO emphasizes three components: Population, Interest, and Context, which together ensure that research questions are systematically constructed and conceptually precise. This structured approach not only facilitates an efficient literature search but also strengthens the coherence of the analysis and synthesis phases. Guided by this framework, the present study formulated the following two research questions:

1. How do institutional and environmental factors, such as regulatory frameworks, socio-political stability, and cultural distance, influence the ability of agro-food SMEs to overcome export barriers in emerging markets?
2. In what ways do firm-level capabilities, financial resources, and managerial cognitive attributes shape the strategies of agro-food SMEs in addressing export barriers during their internationalisation journey?
3. To what extent do networks, interfirm linkages, and the adoption of digital or supply-chain technologies enable agro-food SMEs to mitigate export barriers and enhance their international market performance.

Material and Methods

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework is a widely recognised standard for conducting systematic literature reviews. It ensures transparency, completeness, and consistency throughout the process (Page et al., 2021). By following PRISMA recommendations, researchers can enhance the precision and rigour of their analysis. These recommendations provide a framework for methodically identifying, screening, and incorporating papers into their review. PRISMA emphasises the importance of randomised trials, recognising their ability to reduce bias and provide robust data for the review. This investigation utilised two significant databases, Scopus and Econbiz, due to their extensive coverage and reliability.

The PRISMA methodology is structured into four principal phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and data abstraction. During the identification phase, databases are queried to find all pertinent studies. The screening process involves assessing these papers according to established criteria to exclude irrelevant or substandard research. In the eligibility phase, the remaining studies are meticulously evaluated to ensure compliance with inclusion requirements. Finally, data abstraction emphasises the extraction and synthesis of data from the incorporated studies, which is crucial for formulating significant and dependable conclusions. This methodical approach guarantees a systematic review performed with precision, yielding reliable data that can inform subsequent research and practice.

Identification

In line with the PRISMA framework, the identification stage is crucial for setting the foundation of a transparent and rigorous systematic literature review (SLR). This study systematically explored two major databases, Scopus and EconBiz, using the keywords “Export Barriers,” “Internationalisation,” and “SME Export Performance.” The Scopus search yielded 339 records, while EconBiz produced a significantly higher number of 449 records, resulting in a combined total of 788 documents. These differences reflect not only the diversity of journal coverage but also the varying disciplinary orientations each repository prioritises. Scopus, widely recognised as a multidisciplinary database with strong indexing of high-impact journals, tends to consolidate literature from management, international business, and economics. This explains its substantial, though relatively lower, output compared to EconBiz. In contrast, EconBiz, with its strong emphasis on economic and business-related sources, captures a broader set of publications that intersect with policy, trade, and SME development. The aggregated dataset demonstrates that using complementary databases enhances the inclusivity of the search process, minimising bias associated with single-source reliance. This approach

simultaneously increases the robustness of the SLR. By covering both generalist and specialist indexing platforms, the process ensures a wider representation of knowledge contributions relevant to export barriers and SME internationalisation.

Beyond the numerical data, the identification of 788 records highlights the dynamic and multidisciplinary nature of research on SME export barriers. This substantial volume underscores the importance of the topic in global academic discourse on trade performance and internationalisation strategies of small and medium-sized enterprises. However, the breadth of this initial dataset also presents challenges beyond mere quantity. Many of the identified studies may be duplicates across databases, conceptually overlapping, or irrelevant to the Malaysian agro-food SME focus of the current research. Therefore, the justification for proceeding with a rigorous screening stage, as outlined in PRISMA, lies in ensuring analytical precision. This involves filtering studies that not only address “export barriers” in a general sense but also provide empirical or theoretical insights into SMEs’ performance outcomes in emerging market contexts. Furthermore, the disproportion between Scopus and EconBiz outputs suggests potential differences in regional coverage, publication languages, and indexing depth. These aspects justify triangulating multiple sources to mitigate the risk of omitting region-specific or policy-relevant works that may otherwise remain invisible. While the identification phase is quantitatively descriptive, it is qualitatively significant. It provides the breadth necessary for subsequent refinement, ensuring that the final synthesis is comprehensive, credible, and reflective of diverse scholarly perspectives.

Table 2: The Search String

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (Export AND (Barriers OR Limitation) AND SME*) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Smes") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Export Performance") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Export") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Exports")) OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Internationalization") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Small To Medium-sized Enterprises") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Export Barriers") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Internationalisation") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Small And Medium-sized Enterprise") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "International Business") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "International Trade") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Sme") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Small And Medium-sized Enterprises")) OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Barriers") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Performance") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "Small And Medium Enterprises")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ECON") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "AGRI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2020) OR LIMIT-TO (
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PUBYEAR , 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2022) OR
LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2023) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR ,
2024) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2025))

Date of Access: September 2025

EconBiz Export AND (Barriers OR LimitationN) AND SME

Date of Access: September 2025

Source: Scopus and Econbiz

Screening

The screening stage, the second step of the PRISMA-guided SLR process, is crucial in refining the breadth of identified records into a more precise and analytically manageable dataset. Starting with 788 records retrieved from Scopus and EconBiz, 689 were excluded using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, leaving 98 eligible studies (87 from Scopus and 12 from EconBiz). These stringent criteria were deliberately applied to safeguard the methodological rigour of the review. Non-English publications, works published before 2020, and materials like conference proceedings, book chapters, reviews, in-press articles, and papers outside the scope of business and management (e.g., decision sciences, computer science, arts and humanities, environmental science, engineering, nursing, and energy) were systematically removed. This approach ensured that only peer-reviewed journal articles directly addressing export barriers, SME internationalisation, and export performance were retained, aligning the review with contemporary academic and policy debates. Importantly, excluding older works (<2020) underscores the commitment to capturing the most recent empirical evidence and theoretical advancements, reflecting the rapidly evolving global trade environment shaped by technological disruption, shifting institutional dynamics, and post-pandemic recovery challenges. Additionally, removing subject areas unrelated to the research focus avoided conceptual dilution and disciplinary bias, ensuring the analysis remained grounded in the intersection of international business, trade, and SME performance. After screening, a duplicate check further enhanced reliability by removing one redundant study, leaving a final pool of 97 unique records. This process also highlights the tension between inclusivity and specificity in SLR design. While a broader scope may capture diverse insights, methodological discipline requires narrowing the corpus to those studies most relevant to the research questions. This balance strengthens the credibility, replicability, and theoretical contribution of the review, ensuring subsequent stages of ineligibility and synthesis are based on a foundation of high-quality, contextually relevant evidence.

Table 3: The Selection Criterion Is Searching

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
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Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2020 – 2025	< 2020
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review
Publication Stage	Final	In Press
Subject Area	Business, Management and Accounting Economics, Econometrics and Finance Social Sciences Agricultural and Biological Sciences	Decision Sciences Computer Science Arts and Humanities Environmental Science Engineering Nursing Energy

Source: Scopus and Econbiz

Eligibility

The eligibility stage is a crucial step in the PRISMA process, where screened studies are rigorously examined for thematic and methodological relevance. Out of the 98 articles retained after screening, 60 were excluded using clear criteria. These criteria included titles that misaligned with the research focus, abstracts that lacked connection to export barriers or SME performance, and missing full-text access. Each exclusion safeguarded the study's analytical integrity by filtering out irrelevant or incomplete evidence, ensuring that only substantively relevant and accessible works advanced to synthesis. Ultimately, 28 studies qualified for the final qualitative analysis. While the reduction from 98 to 28 may seem significant, it highlights the methodological discipline required for a credible review. This refined selection forms a solid foundation for exploring export barriers, their causes, and effects on SME performance. This cohesive, empirically grounded body of literature enhances the transparency, depth, and reliability of the review, transforming a broad dataset into a rigorously curated corpus capable of producing meaningful and theoretically significant insights.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

An integrative analysis was employed in this study as a core assessment strategy to critically examine and synthesise diverse research designs, with particular attention to quantitative

approaches. The primary objective of this rigorous process was to identify, organise, and refine relevant topics and subtopics that align with the research questions. The initial stage of data collection marked the foundation for theme development, as illustrated in Figure 2, where 28 selected publications were meticulously reviewed for assertions and evidence pertinent to export barriers in the internationalisation of agro-food SMEs. Through this systematic examination, the authors evaluated not only the methodological approaches adopted in prior studies but also the robustness and implications of their findings, ensuring that the synthesis captured the breadth and depth of scholarly contributions in the field.

Subsequently, the lead author collaborated closely with co-authors to construct overarching themes, drawing directly from the empirical evidence contextualised within this study's framework. To enhance transparency and reliability, a detailed analytical log was maintained throughout the process, documenting reflections, interpretive insights, and unresolved issues encountered during data interpretation. This practice not only reinforced methodological rigour but also ensured that the analytical trajectory could be traced and critically appraised. In instances where thematic inconsistencies or conceptual disagreements arose, the authors engaged in collaborative discussions to reach consensus, thereby safeguarding the validity and coherence of the thematic design. Such reflexive engagement underscores the study's commitment to producing a well-founded, evidence-driven thematic synthesis that advances scholarly understanding of the complex barriers shaping agro-food SMEs' internationalisation pathways.

Table 4: Number and Details of Primary Studies Database

No	Authors	Title	Year	Journal	Scopus	Econbiz
1.	(Njinyah et al., 2025)	Revisiting the Moderation Effect of Network on the Export Barrier–Export Performance in the Cameroon Context	2025	International Trade Journal	/	
2.	(Bennacer et al., 2025)	Digital Transformation in Moroccan SMEs: Overcoming Barriers and Achieving Growth	2025	TEM Journal	/	
3.	(Purwaningsih, 2024)	Utilizing blockchain technology in enhancing supply chain efficiency and export performance, and its implications on the financial	2024	Uncertain Supply Chain Management	/	

performance of SMEs					
4.	(Alkhalailah et al., 2024b)	Barriers to Internationalization: Evidence from Jordanian SMEs	2024	Journal of Project Management (Canada)	/
5.	(Mirza & Baharudin, 2024)	Innovation Barrier to Smes Development: Evidence from Afghanistan	2024	International Journal of Business and Society	/
6.	(Sannegadu et al., 2024b)	Export Barriers for Medium Sized Textile Manufacturing Enterprises in Small Island Developing States (SIDS): Evidence from Mauritius	2024	African Journal of Business and Economic Research	/ /
7.	(Mai & Le Tan, 2024a)	Relationship among government export support, perceived export stimuli, barriers and export performance	2024	Cogent Business and Management	/ /
8.	(Mishra et al., 2023)	Overcoming barriers in automotive SMEs to attain international competitiveness: an ISM approach modelling	2023	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	/
9.	(Haini et al., 2023)	Are formal institutions ineffective for firm performance? Evidence from the economic community of West African States	2023	International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy	/
10.	(Buganova et al., 2023)	SME Internationalization as a Puzzle of Cultural and Bilateral Distances:	2023	South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases	/

Using the Eisenhardt Approach					
11.	(Ali, 2023)	The effect of market information on export performance: The mediating role of notional export support and encouragement	2023	Uncertain Supply Chain Management	/
12.	(Malca, Rubio Donet, et al., 2023)	The impact of institutional distance in export management: insights from Peruvian agro-exporting SMEs	2023	Review of International Business and Strategy	/
13.	(Singh et al., 2023)	Platform-Based Internationalization of Smaller Firms: The Role of Government Policy	2023	Management International Review	/
14.	(Kalafsky & Raymond, 2023)	Overcoming distance: export geographies for SMEs within Atlantic Canada's ocean technology sector	2023	GeoJournal	/
15.	(Malca, Bolaños, et al., 2023)	Export market orientation and export performance in emerging markets: insights from the Peruvian agri-export sector	2023	Journal of Agribusiness in Developing and Emerging Economies	/
16.	(Bertrand et al., 2022)	Export barriers for SMEs in emerging countries: A configurational approach	2022	Journal of Business Research	/ /
17.	(Ključnikov et al., 2022)	Financial performance and bankruptcy concerns of SMEs	2022	Oeconomia Copernicana	/

		in their export decision				
18.	(Pascucci et al., 2022)	Family ownership and the export performance of SMEs: the moderating role of financial constraints and flexibility	2022	Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	/	
19.	(Civelek et al., 2022)	International Differences in the Perceptions of Export Obstacles by SMEs in the Same Firm-Level Characteristics: Evidence from European Countries	2022	Folia Oeconomica Stetinensia	/	
20.	(Civelek & Krajčík, 2022)	How do SMEs from different countries perceive export impediments depending on their firm-level characteristics? System approach	2022	Oeconomia Copernicana	/	/
21.	(Sandoval-Álvarez & Rank, 2022)	Managers' intentions to pursue export expansion an entrepreneurial cognition perspective	2022	Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies	/	
22.	(Virglerová et al., 2021)	Selected factors of internationalisation and their impact on the SME perception of the market risk	2021	Oeconomia Copernicana	/	
23.	(Bahri et al., 2021)	The impact of corruption on the export intensity of SMEs in Tunisia: moderating effects of political	2021	Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies	/	

instability and
regulatory obstacles

24.	(Morini, Polis, Silva, et al., 2021)	Export Barriers for SMEs from Emerging Market: A Model of Analysis for Non-Tech Companies	2021	BAR - Brazilian Administration Review	/
25.	(Arora & Kaur, 2021)	Internationalisation of Indian SMEs: Problems and prospects	2021	International Journal of Economics and Business Research	/
26.	(Virglerová et al., 2020a)	Barriers to internationalisation of SMEs in visegrad group countries; Verslo aplinkos kokybės modelis mvi segmente	2020	Transformations in Business and Economics	/
27.	(Saleh et al., 2021)	Breaking down the export barriers for small and medium-sized enterprises: focus group study across Vietnam	2021	Journal for global business advancement : JGBA	/
28.	(Muhos et al., 2023)	The barriers of export in microenterprises	2023	International journal of management & enterprise development : IJMED	/

Quality of Appraisal

According to the guidelines proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (Kitchenham, 2007), once the primary studies have been identified, their quality must be systematically evaluated to ensure reliability and comparability of the evidence. In this study, the quality assessment framework developed by Anas Abouzahra et al (Abouzahra et al., 2020) was adopted. This framework incorporates six predefined evaluation criteria, each measured using a structured scoring system with three possible outcomes: a score of 1 (“Yes”) was assigned when the criterion was fully met, a score of 0.5 (“Partly”) was given when the criterion was addressed but with some gaps or shortcomings, and a score of 0 (“No”) was applied when the criterion was not satisfied. This systematic approach provides a transparent and consistent basis for evaluating the methodological rigour of the selected studies.

- QA1. Is the purpose of the study clearly stated?
- QA2. Is the interest and the usefulness of the work clearly presented?
- QA3. Is the study methodology clearly established?
- QA4. Are the concepts of the approach clearly defined?
- QA5. Is the work compared and measured with other similar work?
- QA6. Are the limitations of the work clearly mentioned?

The table outlines the quality assessment (QA) framework used to evaluate each study against predefined criteria. Three independent experts conducted the evaluation, rating each criterion on a three-point scale: “Yes” (Y) for full compliance, “Partly” (P) for partial fulfilment with minor gaps, and “No” (N) for non-compliance.

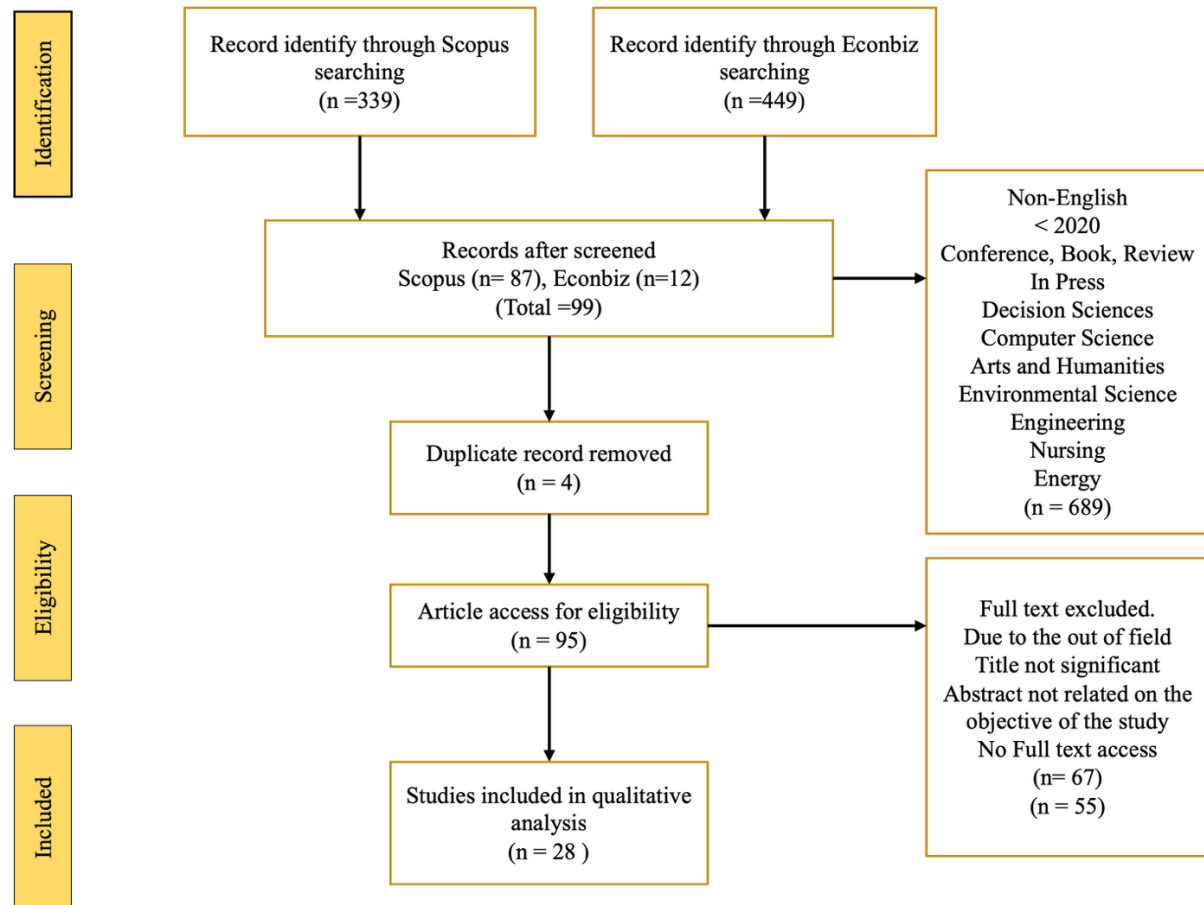


Figure 2: Flow Diagram of The Proposed Searching Study

Source: Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J (2009)

Result and Discussion

The quality assessment results indicate a reasonably strong overall standard in the selected studies. Most papers clearly state their research purpose (QA1), demonstrating the relevance and usefulness of the topic (QA2), and outline the methodology in an explicit way (QA3). This suggests a solid level of academic transparency and rigour. However, weaknesses are evident in two areas: the explicit definition of conceptual approaches (QA4) and the comparison with existing or similar studies (QA5). While many abstracts provide some conceptual clarity, it's not always in depth. Additionally, very few explicitly benchmark their work against prior literature, which limits the ability to evaluate originality and contribution. Another recurring gap is the acknowledgement of limitations (QA6), which appears only in some studies, often in the form of cross-sectional or single-country scope. On average, the studies scored about 4.29 out of 6 (71%), reflecting a satisfactory but not outstanding level of quality. Collectively, this suggests that while the studies are methodologically sound and contextually relevant, their abstracts would benefit from clearer positioning within existing research and more systematic acknowledgement of limitations to enhance credibility and transparency.

Table 4: The Quality Assessment Table for The Selected Papers

Primary Study	QA1	QA2	QA3	QA4	QA5	QA6	Total Mark	Percentage (%)
PS 1	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	3.5	58.3%
PS 2	Y	Y	P	P	N	N	3.0	50.0%
PS 3	Y	Y	Y	P	P	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 4	Y	Y	Y	P	N	Y	4.5	75.0%
PS 5	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 6	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 7	Y	Y	Y	P	N	Y	4.5	75.0%
PS 8	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	3.5	58.3%
PS 9	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	3.5	58.3%
PS 10	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 11	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 12	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 13	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	3.5	58.3%
PS 14	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 15	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 16	Y	Y	P	P	N	N	3.0	50.0%
PS 17	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 18	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 19	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	3.5	58.3%
PS 20	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	3.5	58.3%
PS 21	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 22	Y	Y	Y	P	N	Y	4.5	75.0%
PS 23	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	3.5	58.3%
PS 24	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	4.0	66.7%
PS 25	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	5.0	83.3%
PS 26	Y	Y	Y	P	N	N	3.5	58.3%
PS 27	Y	Y	Y	P	N	Y	4.5	75.0%
PS 28	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	4.0	66.7%

The review of the 28 selected articles revealed three overarching themes that directly address the research questions. The first theme, “Institutional and Environmental Contexts Shaping SME Exporting,” emphasises how regulatory frameworks, trade policies, infrastructure, and broader market conditions significantly influence agro-food SMEs’ ability to access and sustain international markets. The second theme, “Firm-Level Capabilities, Finance, and Managerial Cognition,” highlights the critical role of organisational resources, financial capital, managerial expertise, and cognitive orientations in shaping SMEs’ export readiness, strategic decision-making, and resilience against operational challenges. The third theme, “Networks, Linkages, and Digital/Supply-Chain Technologies as Enablers,” underscores the importance of inter-firm collaborations, institutional and industrial linkages, and the integration of digital tools and supply-chain technologies that empower SMEs to enhance competitiveness, overcome market barriers, and seize emerging opportunities. Together, these themes offer a comprehensive lens through which the dynamics of SME internationalisation in the agro-food sector can be better understood, with detailed explanations for each theme provided in the following section.

Institutional & Environmental Contexts Shaping SME Exporting

Institutional and environmental conditions create multi-layered constraints that shape SME export opportunities unevenly across countries and social groups. For example, evidence from South Africa shows that export barriers vary by racial ownership and supply-network quality, reflecting historical and structural legacies that influence how agricultural SMEs navigate market entry and logistics challenges (Mkansi et al., 2025). In West Africa, formal institutions alone are insufficient to boost productivity without improvements in informal practices, environmental conditions, and workforce skills, highlighting the interdependencies among institutional layers (Haini et al., 2023). Similarly, in Tunisia, corruption, regulatory burdens, and political instability create non-linear effects on export intensity, suggesting that weak governance can either depress or redirect export behaviour (Bahri et al., 2021). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that institutional barriers rarely operate in isolation but interact with legacy inequities, informal norms, and macro-political volatility (Mkansi et al., 2025; Haini et al., 2023; Bahri et al., 2021).

Internal and external constraints jointly condition export performance, although domestic factors often outweigh foreign-market frictions. Studies from Jordan, Mauritius, and Punjab demonstrate that internal deficits, such as financial limitations, managerial weaknesses, and inadequate market knowledge, combine with external pressures like political and socio-cultural obstacles to restrict internationalisation (Alkhalailah et al., 2024b; Sannegadu et al., 2024b; Arora & Kaur, 2021). Conversely, export performance improves when internal capabilities and supportive home-market institutions are strengthened (Sannegadu et al., 2024b). Government policies and governance structures further shape SMEs’ perceptions and export proactivity. For instance, in Vietnam, policy support enhances export performance directly and indirectly by improving managerial readiness (Mai & Le Tan, 2024). In India, governance modes and e-commerce regulations show contingent benefits depending on firm type (Singh et al., 2023; Virglerová et al., 2020b). Institutional support proves most effective when aligned with sectoral realities and platform governance (Mai & Le Tan, 2024; Singh et al., 2023; Virglerová et al., 2020b).

Institutional distance, relationship norms, and geographic or cultural distance all shape coordination, intelligence, and market selection. In Peru, for example, relational norms enhance export intelligence, while large institutional gaps weaken coordination (Malca, Rubio Donet, et al., 2023). Comparative studies in Europe further confirm that policy regimes and firm demographics influence perceived barriers differently (Civelek et al., 2022; (Civelek & Krajčík, 2022). Cultural and geographic distance also affect market selection and adaptation. For instance, firms in Canada, China, and the Visegrad region rely on trade fairs, localisation, and learning to mitigate risks (Buganova et al., 2023; Kalafsky & Raymond, 2023; Virglerová et al., 2021). Overall, SME export success emerges from the interaction of institutional distance, policy support, governance quality, and firm capabilities. For agro-food SMEs, capability development, relationship building, and targeted policy interventions can transform distance and regulatory complexity into manageable challenges (Buganova et al., 2023; Kalafsky & Raymond, 2023; Virglerová et al., 2021; Dubey & Das, 2022; Kalafsky & Raymond, 2023; Sannegadu et al., 2024b).

Firm-Level Capabilities, Finance & Managerial Cognition

Firm-level capabilities and managerial cognition are crucial for transforming opportunities into export success. In Peru's agri-export sector, market orientation enhances performance by promoting export proactivity and coordination capacity, mediated by relational norms (Malca, Bolaños, et al., 2023). Cognitively, perceived benefits and self-efficacy influence managers' export intentions, which drive firm-level commitment (Sandoval-Álvarez & Rank, 2022). Gendered managerial profiles, characterized by education, experience, and networking, lead to diverse export approaches (Vidal-Suárez et al., 2024). Collectively, orientation, cognition, and managerial traits foster routines for sensing and coordinating international activities (Malca, Bolaños, et al., 2023; Sandoval-Álvarez & Rank, 2022; Vidal-Suárez et al., 2024). Policy-linked learning mechanisms strengthen capabilities when firms acquire, share, and act on market information. For example, in Saudi SMEs, market information and responsiveness improve export performance, mediated by support programs (Ali, 2023). Similarly, India's automotive SMEs demonstrate that policy, entrepreneurial orientation, and finance availability are key capability enablers (Mishra et al., 2023). Peruvian evidence further highlights the role of relational norms and intelligence coordination in readiness, underscoring the importance of learning systems (Malca, Bolaños, et al., 2023).

The human capital of owner-managers also plays a crucial role in navigating the complexities of exportation. Chinese immigrant-owned SMEs in Malaysia, for instance, rely on innovativeness and decisiveness to overcome language and policy barriers (Ruan et al., 2025). In contrast, in Spain, diverse managerial profiles reveal that entrepreneurial orientation and network reliance can be complementary factors influencing opportunity pursuit (Vidal-Suárez et al., 2024). Furthermore, cognitive antecedents such as perceived benefits and self-efficacy significantly enhance commitment, guiding export escalation even amidst uneven institutional support (Sandoval-Álvarez & Rank, 2022). These findings suggest that individual cognition and perception translate institutional challenges into distinct export behaviours (Ruan et al., 2025; Sandoval-Álvarez & Rank, 2022; Vidal-Suárez et al., 2024). Financial conditions also influence managerial risk judgements. For example, Afghan SMEs face innovation stagnation due to limited financial resources (Mirza & Baharudin, 2024). Paradoxically, Czech and Hungarian firms exhibit contradictory perceptions of barriers under financial strain (Ključnikov et al., 2022). In Italy, the interaction between family ownership and financial flexibility results

in a U-shaped relationship with export performance (Pascucci et al., 2022). This highlights the significance of financial capacity, solvency, and ownership in shaping managerial decisions (Civelek & Krajčík, 2022; Mirza & Baharudin, 2024; Pascucci et al., 2022).

Overall, capability bottlenecks and policy frictions necessitate integrated strategies that align cognition, finance, and processes. Effective export programmes should emphasise learning routines, responsiveness, and technology access (Ali, 2023; Mishra et al., 2023). Immigrant SMEs benefit from targeted policy support that mitigates language and administrative hurdles, enhancing their entrepreneurial potential (Ruan et al., 2025). Embedding relational norms within market orientation sustains proactivity during volatility (Ali, 2023; Malca, Bolaños, et al., 2023). Export performance ultimately depends on interlinked cognition, financial resilience, and process capabilities, all of which are shaped by ownership and human capital. Intentions, gendered profiles, immigrant traits, and financial flexibility determine whether firms can convert capability into coordinated export action. Where supportive policies and financial slack exist, firms are more effective at transforming managerial learning into continuous export success (Ali, 2023; Malca, Bolaños, et al., 2023; Pascucci et al., 2022).

Networks, Linkages & Digital/Supply-Chain Technologies as Enablers

In emerging-market contexts, interfirm linkages and network positions significantly influence export outcomes. Improved information access, coordination, and market reach are key factors. Evidence from Vietnam highlights the importance of networks for agricultural exporters, ranking them just behind market factors and above management capacity (Nguyen et al., 2023). However, regional analyses reveal structural fragility when export systems concentrate around a few central firms, exposing them to systemic risks (Sisto et al., 2021). Russian SMEs demonstrate equifinal pathways where relational assets complement internal resources and domestic conditions to explain non-export choices. This suggests that networks function as complements rather than substitutes to firm capabilities (Bertrand et al., 2022). Overall, while networks are vital, their value depends on alignment with internal capabilities and contextual fit (Bertrand et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Sisto et al., 2021).

Digital transformation further amplifies these networks by reducing coordination costs and widening discovery channels. Moroccan evidence links digital strategies, cloud adoption, and digital marketing to enhanced growth, efficiency, and market reach (Bennacer et al., 2025). Supply-chain technologies like blockchain improve coordination and traceability, correlating with higher export performance. However, these gains require complementary managerial and financial strategies to be realised (Purwaningsih, 2024). Despite these advancements, digitalisation alone is not sufficient. Ecosystem readiness, digital skills, and supportive infrastructure remain essential, as demonstrated in Morocco where persistent financial and technical barriers limit scaling (Bennacer et al., 2025). Therefore, digital tools should be embedded in wider partnership frameworks, aligning with institutional scaffolding to maximise benefits (Nguyen et al., 2023; Purwaningsih, 2024).

Finally, network finance and brokerage benefits are conditional on context. In Cameroon, loans tied to networks fail to offset the negative impact of financial constraints on exports (Njinyah et al., 2025). Similar configurational patterns suggest that industry corruption, firm age, and contextual frictions shape network effectiveness (Bertrand et al., 2022). Non-tech SMEs, dominated by internal managerial barriers and sociocultural challenges, benefit most from

combining network participation with capability development (Morini, Polis, Silva, et al., 2021). For agro-food exporters, supply-chain connectivity and partner diversification are crucial to reduce concentration and disruption risks (Sisto et al., 2021). Overall, technologies and ties act as complementary enablers that must align with managerial readiness, financing depth, and institutional support to ensure export resilience and growth ((Bertrand et al., 2022; Morini, Polis, da Silva, et al., 2021; Njinyah et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The comprehensive synthesis of studies on export barriers in the internationalisation of agro-food SMEs reveals a complex interplay of institutional, managerial, financial, and technological determinants that collectively shape export performance. These barriers are interdependent, often reinforcing each other through systemic weaknesses in institutional frameworks and firm-level capacities. Guided by the PRISMA framework, this review integrated evidence from twenty-eight primary studies and identified three dominant themes: institutional and environmental contexts, firm-level capabilities and managerial cognition, and the role of networks and digital technologies as enablers. Institutional and policy environments emerged as the strongest determinants of export success. Inconsistent regulations, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inadequate infrastructure undermine competitiveness, while effective governance, trade policies, and public-private partnerships mitigate these constraints. At the firm level, managerial cognition, human capital, and financial flexibility influence how SMEs interpret and respond to external pressures. Managerial self-efficacy and cross-cultural competence enhance export readiness. Technological and network enablers, particularly digitalisation, supply-chain systems, and collaborative partnerships, strengthen market visibility and reduce transaction costs. However, these enablers require sufficient absorptive capacity for successful adoption. This review contributes conceptually by integrating fragmented evidence into a unified framework that explains how institutional, organisational, and technological dimensions jointly influence internationalisation trajectories. Practically, it highlights that export capability development demands managerial training, financial literacy, and innovation adoption. Policymakers should go beyond fiscal incentives to foster export intelligence, cluster-based ecosystems, and technology diffusion. Despite limitations in temporal scope and language selection, the synthesis offers a holistic portrayal of export barriers as evolving challenges. These challenges are shaped by the alignment of external support and internal capacities. Ultimately, overcoming these barriers requires dual intervention: robust institutional reforms and empowering SMEs through cognitive, financial, and technological upgrades. This approach aims to achieve sustainable and competitive internationalisation in the agro-food sector.

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