

THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL AMBIDEXTERITY
ON THE EXPORT POTENTIAL OF BRAZILIAN SMESInocencia Boita Dalbosco^{1*} , Ieda Margarete Oro¹ , Dinorá Eliete Floriani² & Carlos Eduardo Carvalho¹ ¹Universidade do Oeste de Santa Catarina – Chapecó (SC), Brazil.²Universidade do Vale do Itajaí – Itajaí (SC), Brazil.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze how international ambidexterity impacts the export potential of Brazilian small and medium-sized enterprises that participated in an export support program entitled PEIEX. **Method:** The research is descriptive and qualitative, employing a multiple-case study approach with 19 small and medium-sized enterprises as the sample. Data were collected through interviews and document analysis. **Main Results:** According to the findings, most small and medium-sized enterprises developed international ambidexterity, manifested in product development, in defining a product mix for export, and in adopting new technologies. Companies improved their internal operations and acquired external capabilities, which strengthened their export potential. **Relevance / Originality:** In this study, we fill a theoretical gap by exploring how international ambidexterity influences the export potential of small and medium-sized enterprises, contributing to the understanding of internationalization processes in emerging contexts. **Theoretical / Methodological Contributions:** We provide insights into the dynamics between international ambidexterity and export potential, offering a new perspective on how small and medium-sized enterprises can leverage their export capacity through ambidexterity strategies. From a methodological standpoint, we highlight the effectiveness of the multiple-case study approach in understanding complex phenomena. **Social / Managerial Contributions:** We provide recommendations for managers of small and medium-sized enterprises on how to optimize their export strategies and use support programs to overcome barriers and expand small and medium-sized enterprises into international markets.

Keywords: International Ambidexterity, Export Potential, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, Internationalization Strategies, Product Development.

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RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar como a ambidestria internacional (AI) impacta o potencial exportador de pequenas e médias empresas (PMEs) brasileiras que participaram de um programa de apoio à exportação intitulado PEIEX. **Método:** A pesquisa é descritiva e qualitativa e utiliza a abordagem de múltiplos casos com 19 PMEs como amostra. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas e análise documental. **Principais Resultados:** Os resultados mostram que a maioria das PMEs desenvolveu a ambidestria internacional, manifestada no desenvolvimento de produtos, na definição de *mix* de produtos para exportação e na adoção de novas tecnologias. As empresas melhoraram suas operações internas e adquiriram competências externas, o que fortaleceu seu potencial exportador. **Relevância / Originalidade:** Este estudo preenche um *gap* teórico ao explorar como a ambidestria internacional influencia o potencial exportador de PMEs, contribuindo para a compreensão dos processos de internacionalização em contextos emergentes. **Contribuições Teóricas / Metodológicas:** O estudo proporciona *insights* sobre a dinâmica entre ambidestria internacional e potencial exportador, oferecendo uma nova perspectiva sobre como PMEs podem alavancar sua capacidade de exportação por meio de estratégias de ambidestria. No aspecto metodológico, a pesquisa evidencia a eficácia da abordagem de múltiplos casos para entender fenômenos complexos. **Contribuições Sociais / para a Gestão:** A pesquisa oferece recomendações para gestores de PMEs sobre como otimizar suas estratégias de exportação e utilizar programas de apoio para superar barreiras e expandir as PMEs para o mercado internacional.

Palavras-chave: Ambidestria Internacional, Potencial Exportador, Pequenas e Médias Empresas, Estratégias de Internacionalização, Desenvolvimento de Produtos.

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INTRODUCTION

In the business environment, internationalization offers small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) the option to diversify markets. SMEs seek in foreign markets the opportunity to increase sales, and internationalization emerges as a springboard to secure strategic resources and mitigate institutional factors (Ciasullo et al., 2020). In the internationalization of SMEs, it is necessary to consider factors such as the sector of activity, the institutional environment as well as the capacity to market the product or service abroad (Winckler, 2018).

Often, SMEs do not internationalize because they lack the skills and capabilities to export, remaining restricted to the domestic market (Teixeira & Barros, 2014). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017), SMEs are considered less capable and unable to cope with the costs involved in entering international trade. Among the difficulties are limited financial resources and management, unlike large companies with tangible and intangible resources that favor internationalization (Knight & Kim, 2009). Thus, internationalizing requires skills and capabilities that enhance business management in order to position strategically, achieve competitiveness, and gain knowledge of international trade.

Developing dynamic capability (DC) is a key factor for companies to adapt to changing environments and organizational sustainability (Teece et al., 1997). In the context of DC, based on March's (1991) definition of exploration and exploitation, Prange and Verdier (2011) developed the concept of "international ambidexterity" (IA) and established a research field for empirical studies in organizations.

Authors of previous studies on IA have integrated a combinative view with organizational learning, innovation, sustainability, institutional competitiveness, and firm performance. Examples include performance (Hsu et al., 2013) and the relationship between formal institutions, export performance, and institutional programs (LiPuma et al., 2013); export promotion programs, IA, and competitive advantages (Deng et al., 2018); formal institutions and the internationalization process (Parizotto, 2017); international commitment to explain competitiveness (Krinke et al., 2021); degree of internationalization, IA, and organizational performance (Moura & Floriani, 2017);

DC and the Uppsala internationalization process (Vahlne & Jonsson, 2017); IA and sustainability; and international commitment and IA (Krinke et al., 2021). Among the results are the positive impact of IA on opportunity development, networking, trust building, and globalization (Vahlne & Ivarsson, 2014).

In the context of empirical studies, developing ambidexterity can increase export potential by creating favorable conditions to achieve the strategic positioning of organizations in international trade. According to Reuber and Fischer (1998), firm size or time in the market are not determining factors for internationalization capacity; rather, it is the international experience of the management team that proves to be a key resource in explaining SMEs internationalization. Other aspects, such as financial resources, internal processes, expansion capacity, stakeholders, market, and competitiveness, may be considered as benefits of export potential, according to Vallejo Fernández (2020).

Although researchers have investigated IA in various organizational contexts, this study stands out by examining the influence of IA on the export potential of SMEs in an emerging country, supported by the Export Qualification Program (*Programa de Qualificação para Exportação* – PEIEX). In this sense, the research question that arises is: how does IA influence the export potential of Brazilian SMEs? Based on the typology proposed by Prange and Verdier (2011) and the work of Pinho and Prange (2016), in this study, we aimed to analyze the influence of IA in expanding the export potential of Brazilian SMEs.

In this study, we expand the debate on IA in SMEs from emerging markets for export promotion within the context of companies that participated in export promotion programs. Investigating IA in firms can significantly advance the theoretical understanding of international business and management phenomena (Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Liu et al., 2022). As a theoretical contribution, based on the theory of Prange and Verdier (2011), we shed light on IA for the development of the DCs necessary to increase internationalization performance, enabling the expansion of internationalization theory, especially in the study of SMEs. Another contribution lies in the different empirical context from Pinho and Prange (2016), by analyzing IA in the development of DCs (exploration and exploitation), considered essential to expanding the export potential of SMEs.

1. INTERNATIONAL AMBIDEXTERITY IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

Ambidexterity has been studied from different perspectives, including organizational learning, organizational behavior, technological innovation, and DC (Dolz et al., 2019; Popadiuk et al., 2018). Some authors see ambidexterity as a complementary and mediating element for organizational competitive advantage (Zimmermann & Birkinshaw, 2016). In addition, there is the perception of ambidexterity as an element that precedes the development of DC and as a consequence of managing these capabilities (Pasamar et al., 2015).

Due to its unique conceptual characteristics, ambidexterity is considered a typology of DC and, as such, is positively associated with organizational performance (Teece, 2014). In this context, the theoretical choice of this study was to address ambidexterity as a subfield of DC. Each organization must develop its own DC individually, as the required resources vary. Therefore, it is not possible to define an exhaustive list of DC (Fischer et al., 2010).

In the framework developed by Prange and Verdier (2011), there is alignment between the DC of internationalization and the processes of internationalization, exploitation, and exploration. The DC of internationalization includes:

- achieving a sufficient threshold in the domestic market to compete abroad;
- consolidating resources through international experience, creating processes for new opportunities;
- generating learning to operate in international markets. Batra et al. (2021) refer to the process of searching for opportunities through investigation and recombination to deepen knowledge and develop better competencies compared to existing ones. In this dimension, value-adding capabilities are integrated;
- having disruption capability — making changes when necessary.

Authors of previous studies have addressed IA and the dimensions of exploitation and exploration. Hsu et al. (2013) emphasize that exploitation and exploration are not independent of one another, considering that, at the same time that the company is dedicated to ensuring its viability, it must also commit to explor-

ing new alternatives, aiming for organizational sustainability over time.

The integration between exploitation and exploration can become DC over time; in international expansion, it emerges as an essential strategy of the process, as it can ensure long-term business success (Deng et al., 2018). Ambidexterity is also manifested in international innovation networks, as García-Pérez et al. (2021) demonstrate, showing how the simultaneous articulation of exploitation and exploration in collaborative networks enables knowledge exchange, innovation development, and reduced uncertainty in internationalization processes.

This network activity allows companies to cultivate strategic relationships and access external resources, strengthening both their adaptive capacity and innovation orientation, which directly translates into international performance. Choi et al. (2019) show that the complexity of IA lies in adapting existing products to foreign markets or developing innovations for growing opportunities of international expansion.

The categories of IA, according to Pinho and Prange (2016), are:

- exploitation: threshold capacity, that is, firms develop a set of capabilities in their domestic market and, when they reach a sufficient level, they consider themselves ready to enter foreign markets; and consolidation capacity, which helps the company create international structures, focus on opportunity recognition, explore synergies, and develop the skills needed for expansion;
- exploration: value-adding capacity, related to product development or market development skills; and disruption capacity, which results in strategic reconfiguration at the corporate level by questioning existing operational routines, helping the company experiment with new practices, creative thinking, and technological development.

Therefore, IA encompasses the use of strategic decisions, mitigating risks and uncertainties regarding opportunities, and enhancing organizational differentiations, which become competitive advantages (Zhou et al., 2016). Another characteristic of IA, according to Moura and Floriani (2017), is that it allows companies to maximize the benefits of globalization through opportunities and minimize the risks and liabilities associated with international expansion.

Factors, such as scarcity of financial resources and the restriction of competencies and human or organizational capital, can hinder success in the international market (Campos et al., 2019). These firms do not have the same resources and hierarchical structures as large corporations (Dasí et al., 2015). Thus, it is theoretically assumed:

- **Proposition 1:** SMEs' access to the international market develops IA in SMEs.

2. INTERNATIONAL AMBIDEXTERITY AND THE EXPORT POTENTIAL OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

According to previous research, the predisposition for export activity (export potential) is related to variables — such as vision, behavior, perception of opportunities, and management attitude —, leading firms to develop dynamically in the international market (García-Castiblanco et al., 2020). SMEs oriented toward foreign markets must overcome export barriers in their efforts to increase export potential (Morkovina et al., 2018). Researchers focus on the export potential of SMEs, considering resources and capabilities as key factors (Onkelinx et al., 2016).

In Brazil, Cirera et al. (2015) studied pre-export and exporting firms, identifying product diversification as essential. Sui and Baum (2014) highlight that strategic resources, such as innovation, are crucial to the export performance of regional firms that gradually internationalize. In the case of SMEs, according to Akdeve (2013), factors such as lack of knowledge of international markets, lack of awareness of export promotion programs, insufficient capital, and shortage of qualified labor significantly affect export potential.

De La Hoz et al. (2016) argue that studies on export potential are often treated in a fragmented manner and, in many cases, through divergent approaches, thus affecting a unified definition of the subject. Therefore, in this study, export potential was understood according to the theoretical streams that address: pre-internationalization and gradual internationalization models; export behavior and profile; export barriers; and export performance. Regarding pre-internationalization and gradual internationalization models, Wiedersheim-Paul et al. (1978) highlight that, at this stage, the main factors for a firm to ex-

port come from the manager; other factors are the company's profile and the environment in which it is located, which influence favorable export disposition, as well as decisions on entry mode and environmental issues (Roth & Corsi, 2023).

When it comes to export barriers, Leonidou (1995) defines them as attitudinal, structural, and operational limitations that prevent the start of exports as well as their development and sustainability in the international market. According to Carneiro et al. (2016), internal barriers may include low priority given to foreign markets; lack of financial resources; lack of managerial knowledge/experience; and insufficient product stock for expansion. External barriers, in turn, may include lack of government support in promoting exports, exchange rate instability, legal and regulatory barriers in the export market, among others. Torrens et al. (2014) identified networks, commitment to exports, firm size, managerial experience, innovation, entrepreneurial orientation, market orientation, and research and development as determinants of export performance. Taking this into consideration, it is theoretically assumed that:

- **Proposition 2:** IA develops the export potential of SMEs.

3. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This is a descriptive research with a qualitative approach conducted through interviews. Interviewees were selected based on their roles and for having participated in PEIEX. They were identified with the letter "I" and a sequential number. This condition was necessary due to the manager's position on the operationalization and the effects of this process (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). For this investigation, the following case selection criteria were adopted, according to Yin's (2015) guidelines:

- confirmatory cases (possibility of replicating the same phenomenon in other cases);
- contrasting cases (cases of non-realization of exports);
- cases with geographic variations, company size, different sectors of activity, and diversified products.

Confirmatory cases are SMEs that carried out their first export, exported to a new market, or established international business relationships with the possibility of replicating the experience to other

organizations. The selection of contrasting cases in this research was represented by SMEs that did not carry out the export of products. Cases with distinct geographic variations were selected from the Midwest, West, and Far West regions of the state of Santa Catarina (Brazil). The cases under study are presented in Table 1.

In this context, 19 SME managers were interviewed, 16 of which were confirmatory cases and three contrasting cases (non-export cases), with geographic variations, company size, different sectors of activity, and diversified products. Regarding company size, according to the classification of the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (Sebrae, 2022), 14 are classified as SMEs, with one to one hundred employees, and five companies have more

than one hundred employees. The sectors of activity include industries (15) and commerce and services (four), covering areas such as fertilizers, furniture, cleaning products, software, machinery and equipment, food and beverages, among others. The founding years of the companies interviewed range from 1988 to 2000 (eight companies) and from 2001 to 2020 (11 companies).

The theoretical conceptual framework (see Table 2) maps the literature on the research topic, delimiting research cutouts, bibliographic sources, and theoretical and empirical works that preceded the study (Yin, 2015).

For the selection of the participating companies, the following parameters were considered:

- the interviewee being linked to PEIEX;

Table 1. Presentation of the cases.

Types of cases	Case	Evidence	Region	Employees	Foundation	Sector	Product
Confirmatory	I1	First export	West	40	2001	Industry	Fertilizer
Confirmatory	I2	New market	Far West	114	2007	Industry	Furniture
Confirmatory	I3	First export	West	45	1989	Industry	Honey
Confirmatory	I4	First export	Midwest	25	2008	Commerce	Scrap
Confirmatory	I5	First export	Midwest	90	1988	Industry	Upholstery
Confirmatory	I6	Business relationships	West	10	1997	Industry	Cleaning products
Confirmatory	I7	No exports	Far West	5	2017	Industry and Commerce	Furniture
Confirmatory	I8	New market	Midwest	417	1997	Industry	Personal protective equipment
Confirmatory	I9	Business relationships	West	65	2007	Industry	Equipment
Contrasting	I10	No exports	West	12	2011	Commerce/Service	Software
Confirmatory	I11	New market	West	20	2010	Industry	Pet clothing
Confirmatory	I12	First export	Far West	100	1994	Industry	Clothing
Confirmatory	I13	No exports	West	9	2011	Industry	Pillow
Confirmatory	I14	No exports	Far West	29	2019	Service	Software
Confirmatory	I15	New market	West	100	1988	Industry	Refrigeration machines
Confirmatory	I16	First export	West	9	2017	Industry	Food
Confirmatory	I17	Business relationships	West	84	1997	Industry	Equipment
Confirmatory	I18	Business relationships	West	22	2015	Industry	Craft beer
Confirmatory	I19	New market	Far West	437	1993	Industry	Equipment

Table 2. Theoretical structure of international ambidexterity: exploitation and exploration.

Categories	Conceptual definition	Authors
Threshold capability	Companies develop a set of capabilities in their domestic markets and, once they reach a sufficient level, they are considered ready to enter foreign markets.	Pinho and Prange (2016); Prange and Verdier (2011)
Consolidation capability	It helps the company create international structures, focus on opportunity recognition, leverage synergies, and develop the skills necessary for expansion.	Pinho and Prange (2016); Prange and Verdier (2011)
Value-adding capability	Related to product development or market development skills.	Pinho and Prange (2016); Prange and Verdier (2011)
Disruption capability	Results in strategic reconfiguration at the corporate level if existing operational routines are questioned. Helps the company to experiment with new practices, creative thinking, and technological development.	Pinho and Prange (2016); Prange and Verdier (2011)
Export potential		
Pre-internationalization and gradual	Company profile, environment in which the company is located.	Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul (1975)
Exporter profile	Motivations, obstacles, management, company size, export destination.	Becker and Egger (2013); Cavusgil et al. (1979)
Export barriers	Managers' knowledge/experience, legal and regulatory barriers, difficulty in finding clients abroad, difficulty in receiving payments, risks of foreign sales, understanding of foreign cultural aspects.	Kahiya et al. (2014); Wright et al. (2007)
Export performance	Networks, commitment to exports, manager's experience, innovation, market orientation, research and development, percentage of sales from exports.	Aaby and Slater (1989); Zou and Stan (1998)

- the interviewee having access to internationalization information and authorization to share it.

The interviewees were designated I1 through I19.

Research data were collected through primary and secondary data. The interviews (239 transcript pages) and field forms (189 pages) were classified as primary data, totaling 428 pages. Secondary data were found in company documents, such as the work plan (15 pages) and the export plan (40 pages), totaling 1,045 pages. Data collection took place between October 2022 and January 2023. In this research, theoretical saturation was used to determine the number of participants (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

For data analysis, the content analysis technique was used (Mozzato & Grzybovski, 2011). To analyze the research data, we carried out the following:

- transcription of interviews;
- review of transcripts to verify whether additional information was needed;
- use of a theoretical saturation spreadsheet to collect evidence.

Documents were simultaneously used with interview analysis for triangulation of information, as recommended by Yin (2015). The discussion of results was guided by the dimensions, categories, and operational definitions of the research and by the authors who supported the theoretical framework.

4. RESEARCH DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

4.1. International ambidexterity in small and medium-sized enterprises

In the first proposition, the access of SMEs to the international market regarding the development of IA was discussed. Based on this context, regarding the capacity for threshold, which integrates exploitation, we identified that the process of gathering information and clients in the international market, according to the respondents, considered that PEIEX provided tools (8) for companies to conduct the collection of international market data and clients. Data search was also highlighted by companies (6) as one of the

capabilities that the program helped to develop, followed by networking (2), knowledge of fairs and embassies (1), and two companies that did not justify their answers. According to I8, *“the technical staff has so many tools available that you really have several ways to research, several ways to filter the information you need.”*

PEIEX helps SMEs that already export to structure and professionalize their export operations. According to I19, *“you know, it’s pretty much showing us the tools that the Federal Government had, of which we were not aware and which are free and available. All in all, it was about knowing the way and accessing them.”* The threshold capacity occurs when the company develops a set of capabilities and feels ready to enter the foreign market (Pinho & Prange, 2016). We verified that the tools and networking generated confidence to enter the external market, which would be difficult or impossible without such support.

Regarding the consolidation capacity linked to exploitation, we observed that it occurs when the company manages to create international structures, recognize opportunities, and explore synergies, building the necessary skills for expansion. The internationalization of companies, especially SMEs, is accompanied by the development of internal and external conditions that assist and support this organizational process.

An aspect little investigated in the literature is the role of public institutions in activating IA in SMEs. The data suggest that ambidexterity did not arise only from an internal strategic orientation; it was also induced by structured institutional mechanisms, namely PEIEX. This broadens the understanding of the construct, indicating that in emerging markets, ambidexterity may depend less on the firm’s proactivity and more on systematized external support, especially in the early stages of internationalization. This observation complements studies, such as Andreassen et al. (2023) and LiPuma et al. (2013), suggesting that the role of public policies may be reconsidered not only as support, but also as a transformative factor of DC.

We identified two highlights in this research. First, the acquired knowledge (6), as emphasized by I2: *“I believe the greatest influence was the development of our employees here, really. The greatest gain along*

with PEIEX was the knowledge of the operational stuff.” Second, the experience gained (6). According to I3: *“It seemed a tough nut to crack, but now it is much simpler. You can understand it, you have already done it, you already have the experience. You have portals you can access and quickly get information. So, it made things much easier.”*

We verified that the influence and benefits in the internationalization process integrate a set of factors that structure the company, aiming for export to be a constant process, even after participation in the program, corroborating Campos et al. (2019).

Moreover, we observed the contributions to SME participation and/or expansion in the international market, such as the knowledge and learning provided by the program, as stated by I3: *“Facilitating decision-making, the ease of being able to calculate freight costs, of looking for the client. In all these possibilities”*; and I16: *“I would say it was a game changer. It made us believe that we could also grow abroad, to see our product out there.”*

The interviewees state that participating in the program showed the company support structures and operational processes that could limit consolidation. I18 highlighted the influence: *“And now F. went to Paraguay to a trade fair that [...], we are experiencing this post-fair return, which is also a very consolidated place that allowed for several meetings, several encounters with entrepreneurs.”* The analysis of value-adding capacity was carried out according to the exploration dimension, which, according to Batra et al. (2021), refers to the process of searching for opportunities through investigation and recombination to deepen knowledge and develop better competencies compared to existing ones. In this dimension, value-adding and disruption capabilities are integrated.

The value-adding capacity involves evaluating which products are potential for export. Most respondents already had a defined product, either in the export phase or with the intention to export. The program enhanced the export action, adding value to operations through technical knowledge of processes and regulations related to export. For I11, *“as I mentioned, in our case, we make beds and clothes. [...] We found that we could easily export clothes, but we would have some regulatory issues with beds.”*

Some companies work with only one product, and the program helped add value in this segment. For I8: *“So, we have a very large product mix. They are technical products. But we needed to refine it. And thanks to this help, this work, this technical development, we understood that we needed to refine 10, 20 products.”*

The program's influence on product and process quality was analyzed. We observed that the greatest added value came from the standardization of processes and packaging. According to this result, exploration in SMEs goes beyond product development. The standardization of processes and operational improvements also consolidate as forms of incremental innovation that expand export potential, especially in industrial sectors of lower technological complexity.

The literature has focused on radical innovations or new markets as forms of exploration, but we verified that, in small firms, technical refinement and the formalization of production processes also fulfill this role, in line with García-Pérez et al. (2021) and Popli et al. (2022). We observed that the quality of products and processes improves when companies adapt to standards, providing specific technical information for export. This saves organizational resources such as time, staff, and export planning. This result is consistent with Prange and Bruyaka (2016), who argue that the adoption of ambidextrous internationalization strategies fosters product and process innovations, leading to superior performance. Such a finding suggests broadening the understanding of exploration in SMEs to include incremental innovations linked to internal processes, standardization, and operational formalization. To date, the literature prioritizes product or market innovations as evidence of exploration, but our results suggest that process improvements can also be legitimately understood as manifestations of this DC.

The value-adding capability constitutes an important internationalization strategy in terms of exploration. By participating in the program, companies had the opportunity to internally structure themselves and reduce opportunity costs, in addition to developing capabilities and values (Pinho & Prange, 2016).

The disruption capability results from strategic reconfiguration that questions operational routines, allowing the company to experiment with

new practices, creative thinking, and technological development (Pinho & Prange, 2016). This aspect was analyzed based on product development strategies. The definition of the product mix was based on technical criteria, that is, the program's technical support led companies to expand their product portfolio, which also impacted the domestic market. As I4 stated: *“But we launched a lot of products after PEIEX. Bearing not only export in mind, but also the domestic market.”*

One of the disruption capabilities developed was the use of new technologies that the company did not know before participating in the program such as the acquisition of quality control equipment; access to research tools related to the international market, both technical and commercial; the use of export-oriented management software; and research and development tools. According to I16: *“Mainly in terms of machinery. You surpass that artisanal stage. In other words, many internal practices, processes, and machines were changed precisely because we became aware of them.”*

In analyzing Proposition 1, regarding internationalization DC, it can be inferred that most companies developed some of the capabilities — whether related to threshold, consolidation, value-adding, or disruption — and, consequently, IA. IA, in turn, enhanced organizational performance in internationalization as, by developing seemingly opposite capabilities, firms developed differentiated capabilities, corroborating Choi et al. (2019) and Prange and Verdier (2011).

The research demonstrated its occurrence through product development or the definition of product mixes for export, as well as new technologies, among others. Prange and Verdier (2011) state that the internationalization process leads companies to create sets of DCs, which reflect in long-term performance. Thus, IA is the foundation of a sustainable international firm.

In studies conducted in the European context, Andreassen et al. (2023) found that SMEs with well-developed ambidextrous strategies showed greater adaptability to international markets through improvements in internal processes and organizational learning. The findings reinforce the role of ambidexterity as a structural transformation driver in SMEs, even in distinct regulatory contexts, such as Europe. Therefore, our results are aligned with inter-

national evidence that ambidextrous strategies are key to developing internationalization capabilities in SMEs involved in support programs.

Furthermore, Popli et al. (2022) demonstrated that ambidexterity acts as a mediating variable between innovation and international performance in SMEs from emerging markets. The authors emphasize that the balanced articulation between market exploration and internal capability development generates significant gains in international competitive positioning. Thus, the qualitative results of this research corroborate such a perspective by showing that the studied firms not only adopted ambidextrous practices, but also observed tangible improvements in their processes and export outcomes.

4.2. International ambidexterity and the export potential of small and medium-sized enterprises

Proposition 2 addresses IA in the development of SMEs' export potential. The concept of export potential can be defined as the set of conditions that a company can use to leverage its strengths and opportunities in the international market (De La Hoz et al., 2016). The first analysis was based on pre-internationalization and gradual models, in which SMEs usually have the export decision-making process centralized in the manager, taking into account both the organizational profile and the competitive environment, especially regarding proximity to other exporting companies. Hence, a favorable disposition toward exporting develops, and the interaction among these three factors can generate positive influence. We verified that, before participating in PEIEX, some companies were already operating internationally (7), while most (12) had not yet started this activity.

The program's participation brought improvements to companies that did not export before, such as: correct choice of target market for study (2); and improvements in logistics/dispatch processes (1). According to I3, *"it became much clearer. How do you look for clients abroad, how do you get a quotation for maritime freight, the documentary issue, the invoice. All those procedures that seemed like rocket science ended up being simplified."* As well as providing knowledge so that the company could export directly (1), and a basis for understanding

the documentation and legal procedures involved in exporting (1); in addition to sharing free tools and research for the company (1). Thus, the experience helped awaken competitiveness in these companies. According to I8: *"Having support in this, [someone] advising you, showing the way, makes the process much easier. We used to export annually, semiannually. We didn't have the habit of studying the market, not really."*

Next, we analyzed the company's involvement in export activities. Six of them carried out sporadic exports, eight regular exports, and six did not export. Thus, we observed that 70% of respondents had some contact with exporting, either sporadic or regular, while 30% still did not carry out export activities.

As for the motivations of the interviewees to export or to continue exporting, the main reasons are financial, marketing, credibility, and process improvement. The interviewees see exporting as an opportunity to improve the company's revenue, being one of the main motivations. According to I4's statement: *"Look, mainly, having more clients? Did it bring know-how to our current domestic clients? It lent weight to us like: 'the company is fit to export.' So, for us, let's say it conferred us a kind of certificate? A certification."*

Among the destinations of the companies' exports after joining PEIEX, most target countries are concentrated in the Americas, followed by Europe and Asia. We noticed a behavior related to creating know-how in negotiations with closer countries, with long-established trade agreements such as those in Latin America. The choice of country for export depends on market research to verify product feasibility, influenced by the strategic approach, entry mode, and environmental factors in the international context (Roth & Corsi, 2023).

Most companies consider size an advantage in internationalization, as it facilitates information dissemination and export structuring. Respondents emphasized that there is no specific export department; national and international operations are carried out together. PEIEX's technical support optimizes the use of tools and promotes learning within the company.

In investigating export potential, questions were asked about barriers to exporting. For Leo-

nidou (1995), these are attitudinal, structural, and operational limitations that hinder the beginning of exports as well as their development and sustainability in the international market. SMEs face barriers such as international certifications and lack of knowledge of local culture, competition, logistics, Mercosur's common nomenclature, negotiation, finance, language, among other factors of the target country. The results are consistent with Kalafsky and Duggan (2016), who argue that lack of or limited international experience are seen as barriers for SMEs. External barriers include lack of government support, exchange rate instability, legal and regulatory obstacles, low prices to compete, impact of the global financial crisis, inadequate market information, and difficulty in finding reliable distributors abroad.

By identifying these barriers, PEIEX technicians address possible export risks and propose ways to minimize them. The objective was to understand the interviewees' perception of PEIEX's contribution in overcoming this condition and reducing risks. Responses highlighted that PEIEX significantly contributed to understanding export risks, whether financial, informational on how to export, technical for analyzing the scenario, or related to legislation and knowledge of the process, as mentioned by I19: *"There was a country that was high-risk according to our analysis, they didn't want to pay in advance. So, with PEIEX's help, we learned about the guarantee letter, which is that document where there was the advance deposit at the bank there."*

As per the current literature, the idea that turbulent and uncertain environments require ambidextrous strategies to mitigate risks and sustain export performance is emphasized. Zhang and Wu (2023) show that, under high uncertainty conditions, strategic ambidexterity acts as a moderator of export performance, allowing companies to adapt flexibly without compromising operational efficiency. These findings resonate with the accounts of this study's interviewees, who identified PEIEX as a driver of reduction in operational and market risks, especially through technical guidance and strategic support for international decision-making. Moreover, according to our results, in emerging markets, the development of ambidextrous capabilities can be strongly conditioned by external institutional stimuli such as export

support programs. This contrasts with the dominant literature, which typically approaches ambidexterity as an endogenous firm phenomenon, and opens room for future research exploring the role of public policies as catalysts of DC.

In this research, we identified a third function: mitigating operational and strategic risks. Companies report that PEIEX helps deal with uncertainties about markets, payment guarantees, and international standards. This finding reinforces the idea that export support programs not only stimulate innovation and efficiency, but also enable an adaptive capacity focused on managing international risks, which constitutes a possible extension of the ambidexterity concept in emerging contexts.

This result allows expanding the understanding of IA by proposing risk management as its third practical dimension, alongside exploration and exploitation. This perspective suggests the need to refine existing theoretical models, especially regarding SMEs in emerging markets.

In the export potential dimension and export performance category, we evidenced that, after PEIEX qualification, exporting companies increased their export percentage. SME qualification contributes to export potential, whether as a public structure to promote exports, as a form of knowledge sharing, or through increased regional competitiveness. Factors depend on compliance with some regulations, investments in international marketing, pricing strategies that support market entry, logistical partners with competitive freight rates, among other actions.

In terms of marketing, after participating in the program, in addition to creating materials in another language, companies began to use social media more frequently, such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn, to facilitate and strengthen relationships with partners, suppliers, as well as to connect with other companies in the sector and build relationships with executives in the field.

Although the importance of DC in exploitation and exploration for developing export potential is widely highlighted in the reviewed literature (Pinho & Prange, 2016; Prange & Verdier, 2011), we identified an aspect still little explored according to the empirical data: the reduction in risk perception and exposure as a result of participating in export sup-

port programs. By mentioning tools — such as letters of credit, country risk analyses, and access to institutional technical support —, interviewees indicate that IA may also incorporate risk mitigation capabilities, which do not fit exclusively into exploration or exploitation, but rather as a transversal subcomponent of DCs.

This empirical evidence contributes to theoretical refinement, suggesting that ambidextrous action in exporting SMEs not only promotes innovation and efficiency, but also structures protective mechanisms against institutional and operational uncertainties in the international market. It is, therefore, a theoretical gap that deserves greater attention in IA models, especially in the context of emerging markets.

In this study, we present three original theoretical contributions to the field of IA and SME internationalization:

- The introduction of the risk mitigation dimension as a transversal subcomponent of IA, empirically evidenced in the context of Brazilian SMEs, which expands traditional theoretical models;
- The acknowledgement of the active role of public programs as external inducers of ambidextrous capabilities, proposing that institutional policies can act as transformative agents of DC in emerging markets;
- The expansion of the concept of exploration to include internal process innovations and operational standardizations, in addition to traditional product and market innovations, especially in the context of industrial SMEs.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The purpose of this research was to analyze how AI influences the export potential of Brazilian SMEs. To this end, we investigated 19 cases of SMEs that participated in PEIEX, all located in the Western region of Santa Catarina.

We verified that, in the international exploitation process, knowledge of technical and commercial tools related to the international market was a DC that provided organizational learning. This type of learning consists of developing skills and acquiring knowledge to operate in the export market. We demonstrated that companies consolidated existing resources,

which allows them to create processes and routines to explore new opportunities.

In the internationalization process, SMEs valued the standardization of processes and packaging, improving products, reducing costs, and increasing competitiveness. Adaptations to the foreign market also brought significant internal gains. Another outcome was the structuring of the company for both the domestic and export markets. They adapted products, reduced freight costs, obtained certifications, and created a research and development department to support exports.

We observed that most companies developed some of the internationalization DCs, such as threshold, consolidation, value-adding or disruption and, consequently, AI, whether through product development, defining the product mix for export, or incorporating new technologies. It can be inferred that, in exploitation (threshold and consolidation), companies made internal organizational improvements, and in exploration (value-adding and disruption), they acquired external competencies for the international market.

Export potential depends on the priority given to foreign markets, considering barriers such as managers' lack of knowledge, insufficient government support, legal and regulatory obstacles, difficulties in finding clients and receiving payments, risks of international sales, familiarity with business practices, and cultural understanding. In addition to financial benefits, there are operational gains in qualifying companies for the international market.

AI increased the export potential of SMEs by developing four internationalization DCs. Internal processes overcame existing barriers to export. In this study, we provided practical contributions such as organizational diagnostics to identify strengths and weaknesses and prepare companies for the global market. We also provided unprecedented international learning. All in all, developing AI and its capabilities creates conditions to insert SMEs into the global market and increase their export potential.

In terms of theoretical contribution, the study allowed us to expand the understanding of the AI concept by identifying three emerging dimensions not fully explored in the literature:

- risk mitigation as a transversal subcomponent of ambidexterity;

- the structuring role of public institutions as enablers of DCs;
- internal process and structure innovation as a viable and effective exploration strategy for SMEs.

These empirical pieces of evidence reinforce the originality of the study and suggest paths for theoretical advances in future research.

Regarding limitations, we point out that the internationalization DCs were applied in 19 cases, which limits the generalization of results. Furthermore, the data were based on the opinion of a single respondent from each company. Future research may include different contexts, adopt larger sample sizes, use other data sources, and focus on a longitudinal approach. The study on internationalization DCs can be reapplied with companies in the future to identify the process of expansion or non-expansion of international operations after qualification. As the research was conducted in the Brazilian context, there is an opportunity to extrapolate the understanding of the results to other countries, especially emerging ones, with the aim of identifying and comparing them.

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