

## EXPORT MANAGER PROFILE IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES: A GENDER ISSUE?

### PERFIL DEL GESTOR DE EXPORTACIÓN EN LAS PEQUEÑAS Y MEDIANAS EMPRESAS: ¿UNA CUESTIÓN DE GÉNERO?

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#### Abstract:

**Purpose:** To explore the existence of different export manager profiles in terms of managerial attributes and personal traits according to gender. The study aims to answer two research questions: (I) do export manager profiles differ depending on gender? If so, (II) which are the traits or managerial attributes that differ by gender and which is the relationship among them?

**Design/methodology/approach:** The article relies on a quantitative empirical analysis of a sample of export managers of Spanish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

**Findings:** Our results point to the existence of gendered export manager profiles that differ in terms of objective managerial attributes, personal traits, managerial styles, and subjective perceptions relative to discriminatory practices and detrimental stereotypes. Two gender-specific substitution effects exist: one between managers' experiential skills and their formal education and the other between managers' entrepreneurial orientation and the use of relational networks.

**Originality:** Gender is a scarcely studied issue in international business and management literature despite its relevance in the international institutional context. This article addresses the gender aspect of export management.

**Research limitations:** our data are limited in terms of geographical scope and firms size; therefore, our results are not generalizable without new studies on this issue.

**Practical implications:** Our findings can help firms to understand the relevance of export teams that encompass different gender managers and benefit from the combination of diverse managerial attributes, personal traits, and relational processes in their international growth.

**Key words:** Export manager, managerial attributes, gender, SMEs, relational networks.

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** Explorar la existencia de perfiles de gestor de exportaciones diferenciados en función del género. El estudio pretende responder a dos preguntas de investigación: (I) ¿difiere el perfil de los gestores de exportación en función del género? En caso afirmativo, (II) ¿en qué atributos directivos/rasgos se observa la diferencia y cuál es la relación entre ellos?

**Diseño/metodología:** Análisis empírico cuantitativo sobre una muestra de gestores de exportación de pequeñas y medianas empresas (PYMEs) españolas.

**Resultados:** Nuestros resultados apuntan a la existencia de perfiles de gestor de exportación diferenciados por género en términos de atributos objetivos, rasgos personales, estilos de gestión y percepciones relativas a prácticas discriminatorias y estereotipos perjudiciales. Existen dos efectos sustitución en función del género: (I) experiencia profesional versus educación formal y (II) orientación empresarial versus uso de redes relacionales.

**Originalidad:** El género es una cuestión escasamente estudiada en la literatura sobre gestión internacional a pesar de su relevancia en el contexto institucional internacional. Este artículo aborda el aspecto del género en la gestión de exportaciones.

**Limitaciones:** Nuestros datos son limitados en términos de ámbito geográfico y tamaño de las empresas; por tanto, no son generalizables sin la realización de nuevos estudios.

**Implicaciones prácticas:** Nuestras conclusiones pueden ayudar a comprender la relevancia de los equipos de exportación que integran a directivos de diferente género y se benefician de la combinación de diversos atributos directivos, rasgos personales y procesos relacionales en su crecimiento internacional.

**Palabras clave:** gestor de exportaciones, atributos de gestión, género, PYMEs, redes relacionales.

## 1. Introduction

The Upper Echelons Theory statements relative to the influence of managers' attributes on their decision-making processes and strategic choices (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) has been widely tested in relation to firms' international growth through export activity. Literature analyzing the personal traits and managerial attributes that are relevant for managing the export processes is extensive and conclusive: the pioneering and recognized work by Leonidou *et al.* (1998) has been extensively tested, applied, extended, and updated to identify a set of managers' traits and attributes that influence their willingness and skills to engage in international growth processes. These attributes encompass some objective characteristics, like managers' formal education or professional experience, and subjective traits related to their perceptions and attitudes, like their innovativeness degree or dynamism. Furthermore, while some of these traits are similarly relevant for other managerial decisions, others are specifically relevant for international growth ones, just for instance, the managers' international background or experience.

Conversely, the (potential) gendered differences of these traits and their relevance when managing export processes has been almost fully overlooked in existing literature. Actually, gender is an under-represented issue in international business and management (IB&M) literature. This is so despite the fact that gender is a culturally sensitive construct and that the (national) context shapes each country's social acceptance of gender roles and gendered business expectations (Eden & Gupta, 2017). In sort, "... if any discipline ought to be interested in issues around gender, it is international business" (Michailova & Hutchings, 2016, p. 351). While the literature dealing with the influence of gender on export activity is scant and inconclusive, the literature analyzing the relationship between gender and export managers' attributes is almost non-existent with just a few exceptions. Among the most recent ones, the study by Araújo *et al.* (2022) showing that gender differences exist among export managers in terms of some human capital traits.

Being aware of existing differences and understanding how they impact the management of the export processes is relevant to help firms to design their export management teams. Therefore, this paper aims to explore if there are gender differences relative to the attributes and traits recognized in the literature as relevant for managing export processes. Apart from the attributes widely acknowledged in existing literature (i.e.: formal education, professional experience, international background, entrepreneurial orientation, relational networks, and personal traits), we have included managers' perceptions relative to discrimination practices and detrimental stereotypes based on gender and to work-family balance concerns, as we think they are relevant issues considering the gender focus of our article. Specifically, our study aims to answer the following research questions: (I) do export manager

profiles differ depending on gender? If so, (II) which are the traits or managerial attributes that differ by gender and which is the relationship among them?

Our empirical study relies on a sample of Spanish managers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Spain is a proper context for this research for different reasons: (I) it is considered a collectivistic (rather than individualistic) society (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, House *et al.*, 2004) characterized by the relevance provided to group membership and the strong ties and loyalty among group members<sup>1</sup>. The collectivism degree within the society influences females' engagement in business activity and the extent to which they rely on their in-groups to develop this activity (Bullough *et al.*, 2017b). (II) In the last decades, a bulk of Spanish firms have largely engaged in international activity (Salas, 2018), at the same time, numerous policies and laws have been implemented to foster the females' engagement in business activity (Bustelo, 2016). Consequently, the involvement of Spanish females in international business activity is catching the interest of firms, export trade agencies, and export promotion institutions (Garcia-Cabrera *et al.*, 2021).

The article is organized in the following way: section 2 presents a literature review of the above-mentioned managerial attributes identified in existing literature as relevant for export managers, as well as to managers' perceptions relative to gendered discriminatory practices or stereotypes. After presenting the database, variables, and methods used in the empirical analysis, we show and discuss the main findings. The section including the final conclusions, the article's main limitations, and the identification of new research lines related to this issue closes this piece of research.

## **2. Literature review**

According to the Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), the organizations' decisions and strategies are a reflection of their decision-makers' values and cognitive bases (e.g.: cognitive tendencies, thinking models, risk-taking levels) that, in turn, are conditioned by their own personal characteristics. In other words, "strategic choices have a large behavioral component that reflect the idiosyncrasies of decision makers" (p. 195). These individual characteristics or managerial attributes are demographic, psychological, and attitudinal traits that may influence export behavior (Welch *et al.*, 2008). An extensive body of literature researched this issue during the second half of the past century. Through their exhaustive literature review, Leonidou *et al.* (1998) identified two sets of managers' characteristics directly linked to export activity and behavior. The first one deals with objective personal and cultural characteristics of managers (e.g.: formal education, international

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<sup>1</sup> See Martín-Ujedo *et al.* (2019) for an analysis of the relationship between national cultural dimensions and gender in the business context in the particular case of Spain.

background, professional experience), the second set deals with subjective characteristics related to managers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g.: managerial style, innovativeness, and dynamism).

In the following paragraphs we present the managerial attributes related to export activity and behavior most widely addressed in IB&M literature. In addition, two managerial attributes not included in this literature but relevant for our gender-focused research and frequently analyzed in other management fields (e.g.: entrepreneurship) have been added: managers' perceptions related to discrimination and the existence of gender-based stereotypes and to challenges related to the work-family balance.

#### *Educational background*

Managers' formal education background is a significant factor influencing the export process: the higher the education the more likely the manager is open-minded, exhibit interest in foreign affairs, and is prepared to objectively evaluate the potential advantages of international business activity (Leonidou *et al.*, 1998). As stated by Hambrick & Mason (1984), formal education enhances information processing capabilities and strengthens the cognitive foundation that supports strategic decision-making. Consequently, managers with higher educational qualification show a broader business perspective and improved risk-taking abilities (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2015). Furthermore, these managers are better prepared to process marketing and cultural information related to foreign markets with a lower ethnocentric bias, being more receptive to their differentiated characteristics and needs. In short, the higher the managers' formal education, the larger their skills and capabilities to successfully engage in export activity (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2015; Mohan, 2019). Existing literature consistently supports this positive association between managers' educational level and their role as export managers or internationalization decision-makers (e.g.: Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2015; Herrmann & Datta, 2005; Hughes & Yang, 2020; Mohan, 2019).

#### *International experience*

International experience stems from managers' prior engagement in work, study, or living abroad. It gives rise to human, social, and career capital (Bullough *et al.*, 2017a) that facilitates engaging in export activity. Managers' international experience is an embedded and specific knowledge valuable to firms and difficult to imitate (Ruzzier *et al.*, 2007). The international background accrued through professional, academic, and personal experiences fosters the development of a global and open mindset, enhances the orientation towards foreign countries, and reduces the perceived risk of internationalization projects (Ren & Zeng, 2021; Watkins-Fassler & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2019). International background is usually linked to foreign language proficiency, travel experience, and skills

to be aware of, understand, and manage differences in cultures, business practices, and legal frameworks (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2015; McDougall *et al.*, 2003; Morosini *et al.*, 1998; Zucchella *et al.*, 2007). In other words, managers with international exposure have a better understanding of the challenges associated with internationalization and are more inclined to perceive international expansion as an opportunity rather than a threat. The international exposure enhances their capacity to analyse different economic environments and trade policies, evaluate the attractiveness of international markets, understand foreign consumer preferences, adapt their products and services to these preferences, and manage relationships with international stakeholders (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2015; Sousa & Bradley, 2008). Furthermore, it fosters the development of connections and relational networks (Ruzzier *et al.*, 2007) that facilitate identifying market opportunities and overcoming the barriers to international growth traditionally linked to the economic, institutional, and/or psychic distance between the home and host countries.

#### *Professional experience*

Professional experience is another indicator of human capital that exposes decision-makers to valuable information and contacts, enriches their managerial expertise (Leonidou *et al.*, 1998), enhances their ability to process information and make informed decisions (Herrmann & Datta, 2005), and facilitates the comprehension and management of complex decisions like international growth ones (Rivas, 2012). As it happens with international experience, professional experience is an embedded and valuable resource that can even compensate for educational deficiencies when dealing with international growth decisions (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2015; Orser *et al.*, 2010).

In the international context, professional experience increases managers' skills to understand and even anticipate the competitive environment, identify business opportunities, implement successful competitive strategies, manage relationships with clients and suppliers, develop effective human resource practices, and comply with regulatory requirements (Ruzzier *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, it is a source of relational links and professional networks that can facilitate the internationalization process (Araújo *et al.*, 2022).

#### *Relational network and social capital*

Social capital is "the connections among individuals: social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Social networks facilitate informal learning and provide access to intangible resources like timely knowledge and information, contacts, advice; referrals to others in the network, and access to legitimacy and role models through association with others who are working (and succeeding) in the same field. They facilitate customer acquisition and a deeper understanding of international customers' needs. Furthermore, these networks provide

psychological and emotional support that boost managers' self-confidence and reduce the sense of isolation —see Rosenbaum (2017) and Tonge (2008) for an exhaustive review. These are valuable resources necessary to grow international, particularly for small firms and new ventures (Coviello & Cox, 2006; Jones *et al.*, 2011; Manolova *et al.*, 2010; Rosenbaum, 2017): as small firms are usually resource-constrained, networks are a way to access the resources that are particularly costly and/or difficult to develop internally or to acquire through the market. In short, by participating in networks SMEs can overcome some difficulties that traditionally hinder their international growth: the liability of foreignness and outsidership (Zaheer, 1995; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009) and the liability of smallness (Aldrich & Auster, 1986).

Firms can rely on two different types of networks: formal and informal ones. The former are links on a firm-level basis —firm and institutional contacts like agents, suppliers, competitors, professional associations, chambers of commerce, etc.—, while the latter rely to a higher extent on personal contacts, affective ties, and trusting relations —e.g.: friends, colleagues or ex-colleagues, family members. The information exchanged in formal networks usually has higher market value, while the information transmitted in informal networks is more likely to be trustworthy (Rosenbaum, 2017).

#### *Entrepreneurial orientation*

The entrepreneurial orientation deals with the strategy making processes that decision makers use to place their firm's organizational purpose, sustain its vision, and create competitive advantages (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). The idea that exporting is an entrepreneurial decision is widely acknowledged in existing literature —see Welch *et al.* (2008) for an exhaustive review. As stated in McDougall & Oviatt (2000), the international growth decision is an entrepreneurial one because it is a proactive, innovative, and risky decision aimed at looking for and profiting from new opportunities. Export managers must show a high innovativeness degree, as initiating the export activity is an innovation comparable to the development of new production processes or the introduction of new products (Leonidou *et al.*, 1998). Therefore, high degrees of creativity, dynamism, and willingness to move away from existing patterns help managers to make exporting decisions. The link between managers' entrepreneurial orientation and firms' international growth has been extensively documented in existing literature (e.g.: Taylor, 2013; Zimmerman & Brouthers, 2012).

#### *Personal traits and management style*

Literature shows the existence of a relationship between gender, decision-making styles, and firms' decisions and/or results<sup>2</sup>. Anyhow, the relevance of managers' personal traits and management styles

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<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Ilie & Cardoza (2018), Inostroza *et al.* (2023) and Inostroza & Espinosa-Méndez (2022) for a review.

has been scarcely analyzed in existing export literature. Export activities usually rely on agreements with third parties whether intermediaries in non-direct export processes (e.g.: agents or distributors) or partners in shared export ones (e.g.: export consortia, piggy bags). As shown in Araújo *et al.* (2022), the successful management of export collaborative agreements heavily relies on managers' communications skills, flexibility, and reciprocal information sharing and trust, rather than on hierarchy and formal control. Therefore, managers' personal traits that foster this relational (rather than competitive —competitiveness, ambition, self-sufficiency, and assertiveness are among the personal traits usually related to the competitive approach to work) approach to work are critical for export managers, among them, interpersonal, communication, and collaborative skills like empathy, communication abilities and expressiveness, sensitivity, warmth, and compassion (Araújo *et al.*, 2022; Connerley *et al.*, 2008; Moreno-Gómez *et al.*, 2018; Welch *et al.*, 2008).

#### *Perceptions of gender discrimination or detrimental social values related to gender.*

Literature shows that women frequently face higher difficulties than men to get involved in international business projects or access the export manager position and women led business face more difficulties to grow international (Araújo *et al.*, 2022; Orser *et al.*, 2010; Pernía *et al.*, 2012; Welch *et al.*, 2008). In line with the liberal feminism approach (Fischer *et al.*, 1993), some of the reasons pointed by existing literature relate to the existence of gendered social values and institutions that condition the individuals' assumptions about how females should behave and their role within the society and within business activity (Pergelova *et al.*, 2019), raising additional barriers for women to get access to productive and financial resources, get legitimacy, participate in professional networks, get access to supporting structures or, even, participate in intercultural relationships (Alon *et al.*, 2013; Treichal & Brouthers, 2004). The experience or perception of these situations is a barrier for female managers to engage in internationalisation processes (Ahl, 2006). Gender discrimination and stereotypes contribute to the glass ceiling females can encounter when trying to perform as export managers, so that the well-known Schein's (1973) statement could be extended as “think export manager - think male”.

#### *Work family balance*

Access to formal (e.g.: institutional programs) or informal (e.g.: support from friends and relatives) actions and programs that help achieving a work-family balance can be a key factor conditioning managers' commitment to the company and engagement in its projects (Calzón-Menéndez *et al.*, 2023; Clancy, 2007), among them, the international projects. International growth projects usually require managers to travel and stay outside their home for periods of time that increase the difficulty to achieve a job-family balance to such a point that export managers are frequently negatively associated with



family-oriented managers (Araújo *et al.*, 2022). This is particularly relevant for women, as they usually take higher family responsibilities and face higher constraints that reduce their availability to get involved in those international activities (Mohan, 2019; Pergelova *et al.*, 2019; Rosenbaum, 2017). In numerous societies women traditionally serve as main caregivers and domestic workers within their families and this hampers their economic participation and career progression in the international field (Araújo *et al.*, 2022; Welch *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, the *Motherhood dimension* —a metaphor representing all kind of household and family duties and caring responsibilities— that Brush *et al.* (2009) include in their gender-aware-framework for entrepreneurship is fully applicable to international entrepreneurship and export management.

### 3. Empirical analysis

#### *Database*

To get sample homogeneity in terms of economic environment and firm characteristics our dataset encompasses small and medium-sized firms located in the Spanish autonomous community known as Principality of Asturias (within Spain, an autonomous community is an administrative and political unit). Our initial population comprehended 776 firms having international experience. To identify these firms, we relied in two different datasets: (I) the database compiled by the Spanish official export credit agency (through its subsidiary Informa Duns & Bradstreet) encompassing all Asturian firms in the official Business Registry (2020) with organizational structure and international activity and (II) the information provided by the regional foreign trade agency (ASTUREX) aimed at promoting and supporting the export activity of the SMEs located in the autonomous community.

An email survey was delivered to these firms requesting information about their export or internationalization managers relative to the range of issues previously addressed in the literature review (formal education, professional experience, international background, etc.); furthermore, when sending the email and introducing our research, we explicitly asked for a survey answer by the person in charge of the international and/or export decisions within the firm. Recommendations by Dillman (2000) for survey design, pre-test, and survey administration were followed. Table I shows the technical fact sheet.

We got 148 complete answers (19.1% response rate). Micro firms have a strong weight in our sample (63%). Up to 40% of the companies are in the professional, scientific, and technical service industry, 36% are manufacturing companies, with the commercial sector (wholesale and retail) in third place (19%). The presence of females among respondents is 24% and the weight of females in management teams is 26.8%. Therefore, there is a limited presence of females in internationalization responsibility positions that is consistent with the Spanish and European managerial reality (EIGE, 2022).

**Table I. Technical fact sheet**

<b>Type of research</b>	Quantitative
<b>Population</b>	Asturian firms with international activity: 776 firms
<b>Fieldwork</b>	September-December 2021
<b>Information collection</b>	Online survey
<b>Sample size/response rate</b>	148/19.1%
<b>Confidence level</b>	95%
<b>Margin of error</b>	7.25%
<b>Statistical test support</b>	R Software 2.7-1 & Jamovi 2.3.21
<b>Analysis techniques</b>	Descriptive and inferential statistics (Student's t test, correlation test, $\chi^2$ test, principal component analysis)

Before studying the export managers' attributes, a first analysis was carried out through statistical inference tests to explore the potential relationship between the gender of the export managers and the firms' export intensity (percentage of exports over total sales) that shows that no statistically significant relationship exists among them.

#### *Variables and methods*

Gender was measured through a dichotomous variable relying on the information directly provided by survey respondents about their own gender (1= female, 0= male). Although the option "I prefer not to answer" was included in the survey when placing the question about gender, we did not get responses with it; that is why our gender variable relies on these the above-mentioned basic options. The information relative to the different variables used to measure the respondents' managerial attributes is shown in Table II.

Statistical inference was used to analyse the relationship between gender and the different managerial attributes, performing diverse analyses depending on the nature of the variables used to measure these attributes: when these variables are dichotomous, we relied on  $\chi^2$  tests, when they are continuous, Student's t test were carried out. All the variables followed a normal distribution and tests for homoscedasticity of variances were performed.

In addition, as a preliminary step, to achieve a manageable measurement scale, and given the correlation evidenced among the 10 variables measuring the managers' personal traits (see table III), we performed a principal component analysis. Both the results of the KMO test (0.710) and the significance obtained (0.000) in Bartlett's test of sphericity, guarantee the adequacy of the test. This analysis gave rise to two factors that jointly explain over 48% of the variance in the dataset. We labelled

these factors as “collaborative skills” and “competitive skills” (see table III). The first factor encompasses managers’ attributes related to communications skills, trust building, and relational approach to work (warmth, compassion, empathy, expressiveness, sensitivity). The second one brings together attributes related to a more competitive orientation to work (assertiveness, leadership, competitiveness, self-reliance, ambition).

**Table II. Managers’ attributes: Variables used in the study**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Type of variable</b>	
<b>Educational background</b>	Dichotomous (1: university and/or postgraduate studies; 0: otherwise)	
<b>International experience</b>	Dichotomous (1: academic training and/or residence for professional reasons in a different country; 0: otherwise)	
<b>Professional experience</b>	Continuous (number of years of professional experience)	
<b>Relational network</b>	5-point Likert scales (from 1 “not important” to 5 “utmost important” for the development of the professional activity)	
		<u>Formal</u> : professional associations
		<u>Informal</u> : friends, colleagues, family members
	<u>Informal</u> : social networks	
<b>Entrepreneurial orientation</b>	Continuous (number of companies set up as partner)	
<b>Personal traits</b>	5-point Likert scales (from 1 “nothing or almost nothing” to 5 “a lot or almost always”)	
		Assertiveness (ASSERT)
		Warmth (WARMTH)
		Leadership (LEAD)
		Compassion (COMPAS)
		Competitiveness (COMPET)
		Self-sufficiency (S-SUFF)
		Empathy (EMPATH)
		Expressiveness (EXPRES)
Sensitivity (SENSIT)		
Ambition (AMBITI)		
<b>Perceptions</b>	5-point Likert scales (from 1 “never or rarely” to 5 “always or almost always”)	
		Gender discrimination
	Gender stereotype	
<b>Work family balance</b>	5-point Likert scales (from 1 “totally disagree” to 5 “totally agree”)	
		Availability to travel abroad
		Availability to live abroad
	Institutional support	

Table III. Principal component analysis for managerial traits

PREVIOUS CORRELATION TEST									
	WARMTH	LEAD	COMPAS	COMPET	S-SUFF	EMPATH	EXPRES	SENSIT	AMBIT
ASSERT	0.074 (0.368)	0.330 (0.000**)	0.069 (0.405)	0.111 (0.180)	-0.021 (0.798)	0.197 (0.017*)	0.249 (0.002**)	0.012 (0.884)	-0.028 (0.737)
WARMTH		0.076 (0.360)	0.408 (0.000**)	-0.101 (0.220)	0.149 (0.072)	0.474 (0.000**)	0.377 (0.000**)	0.485 (0.000**)	-0.051 (0.536)
LEAD			-0.001 (0.995)	0.372 (0.000**)	0.194 (0.018*)	0.155 (0.060)	0.142 (0.084)	0.097 (0.241)	0.334 (0.000**)
COMPAS				0.007 (0.937)	0.125 (0.129)	0.456 (0.000**)	0.193 (0.19*)	0.489 (0.000**)	0.001 (0.991)
COMPET					0.197 (0.017*)	0.030 (0.715)	0.039 (0.637)	-0.086 (0.300)	0.597 (0.000**)
S-SUFF						0.032 (0.697)	0.125 (0.131)	0.102 (0.219)	0.183 (0.026*)
EMPATH							0.401 (0.000**)	0.544 (0.000**)	-0.040 (0.626)
EXPRES								0.386 (0.000**)	-0.066 (0.425)
SENSIT									-0.091 (0.270)
RESULTS OF PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS									
Rotation method: Oblimin									
FACTOR	Items included		$\alpha$ -Cronbach	$\omega$ -McDonald	% variance				
<b>Collaborative skills</b>	Warmth, Compassion, Empathy, Expressiveness, Sensitivity		0.778	0.789	28.1				
<b>Competitive skills</b>	Assertiveness, Leadership, Competitiveness, Self-sufficiency, Ambition		0.586	0.632	20.4				

*Findings and discussion*

Table IV shows the results of our empirical tests. As shown in the table, female export managers show statistically significant higher levels of educational background, use of formal and informal networks, and collaborative skills. Additionally, female export managers perceive the existence of situations related to gender discrimination or the existence of negative gender stereotypes to a higher extent than their male counterparts. Conversely, their professional experience and entrepreneurial orientation are lower than those of male export managers. No statistically significant differences were found among female and male managers relative to international experience or work-family balance issues like availability to travel or, even, live abroad due to work reasons or the institutional support to achieve this balance.

Taken as a whole, these results point to the existence of gendered export manager profiles that differ in terms of human and relational capital, personal traits, entrepreneurial orientation, and perceptions relative to discrimination practices and detrimental stereotypes based on gender.

As a first differentiated element, it seems that female export managers show higher levels of human capital in terms of formal qualification but lower in terms of experiential professional skills. Our results

are consistent with existing literature that shows that female managers need higher educational levels than their male counterparts to get similar positions in management teams (Araújo *et al.*, 2022; Liff *et al.*, 1997) or board of directors (Molinero-Díez *et al.*, 2022; Weihong *et al.*, 2020). Literature also points to female export managers or entrepreneurs as having lower levels of professional experience (Araújo *et al.*, 2022, Camelo-Ordaz *et al.*, 2016). Formal education is one of the most relevant elements of human capital for export managers, as it facilitates the identification and development of business opportunities in new markets. A second key element of human capital that enlarges export decision-makers' managerial knowledge and expertise is professional experience. Literature points to experiential skills as a complement to, and even substitute for, formal education. Our results point to a gendered substitution effect, as the lower level of experiential skills shown by female managers seems to be compensated by their higher qualification in terms of formal education.

**Table IV. Managerial attributes: Analysis of gendered differences**

Variables	Statistical (p-value)	GENDER	
		Female	Male
	$\chi^2$ test	%	
Educational background	2.912*	94%	83%
International experience	1.064	72%	61%
	Student's t test	Average	
Professional experience	-1.912*	19.37	23.42
Formal networks: professional associations	2.754***	3.67	3.09
Informal networks: friends, colleagues, family members	1.867*	3.61	3.18
Informal networks: social networks	3.416**	4.03	3.39
Entrepreneurial orientation	-2.158**	1.19	1.77
Collaborative skills	1.809*	3.01	2.34
Competitive skills	0.759	2.55	2.48
Perceptions of gender discrimination	2.890***	2.03	1.28
Perceptions of gender stereotype	1.991**	2.30	1.78
Work family balance: availability to travel abroad	0.409	4.08	3.98
Work family balance: availability to live abroad	0.216	2.39	2.33
Work family balance: institutional support	-0.947	3.53	3.79

Conversely, no statistically significant differences were found related to international experience (whether personal or professional). Therefore, it seems that an international background that facilitates the orientation towards international markets and the development of skills to wave in the international environment, identify business opportunities and manage cultural and business differences is equally relevant for males and females.

Female export managers show lower levels of entrepreneurial orientation usually linked to lower degrees of proactivity and willingness to take risks (Sullivan & Meek, 2012). Empirical evidence and literature on entrepreneurship consistently evince that the phenomenon of entrepreneurship is deeply gendered with females being less prone to get involved in entrepreneurial activities (an exhaustive review can be found in Strawser *et al.* (2021). Empirical data in the OECD and GEM reports consistently shows the persistence of this gender gap. Among the factors that condition the entrepreneurial orientation are the individuals' perceptual factors related to their own self-efficacy, ability to recognize opportunities, and fear of failure. Empirical evidence shows that females usually report lower self-perceptions related to their abilities to succeed in entrepreneurial tasks and to recognize business opportunities and higher degrees of fear to get involved in unsuccessful ventures that restrict their entrepreneurial intentions (Camelo-Ordaz *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, these self-imposed barriers seem to have a stronger impact on growth-oriented endeavors (Strawser *et al.*, 2021) as international growth an export activity.

A new substitution effect arises, as this shortage in self-entrepreneurial orientation seems to be counterbalanced with a higher involvement in relational networks that have been consistently pointed as key drivers of entrepreneurial activity (Hanson & Blake, 2009). Female export managers rely to a larger extent on social capital and relational networks, both formal (i.e. business associations) and informal (networks participated by friends and family and social networks). Our results are consistent with existing literature that shows that there are gender differences in the way in which entrepreneurs and managers enter external networks and use their resources (Renzulli *et al.*, 2000). Networks are particularly relevant mechanism for business females to get access to the informal learning and support they need to engage their firms in a growth process, as well as to identify business opportunities (Hanson & Blake, 2009; Hughes & Yang, 2020; Sullivan & Meek, 2012; Tonge, 2008). Furthermore, our results in terms of personal traits also provide support to the female export managers' relational approach to work that places the emphasis in interpersonal and collaborative skills rather than on competitive ones, fostering the development of strong relationships with clients, intermediaries, and partners. These interpersonal and collaborative skills are tightly related to democratic, inclusive, and flexible management practices that move away from hierarchy and relations based on power and organizational status that are particularly relevant in cross-cultural and international contexts (Araújo *et al.*, 2022; Connerley *et al.*, 2008; Ren & Zeng, 2021).

Formal networks are relevant for female export managers in spite of the fact that females usually experience higher barriers to formal networking drivers and actions as exclusion from traditionally formal male-dominated power networks (frequently addressed in the literature as old boys' clubs) or the time and effort needed to network —e.g.: difficulties for out-of-hours socializing due to family

responsibilities— (Hanson & Blake, 2009; Pergelova *et al.*, 2019; Rosenbaum, 2017; Tonge, 2008). Consequently, female entrepreneurs tend to prefer informal networks, which are typically smaller, denser, and composed of strong relational ties (Hanson & Blake, 2009; Manolova, 2010; Renzulli *et al.*, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2017). Family and close friends and colleagues provide business support, confidence, and start-up capital (Mohan, 2019) which is particularly relevant for manager females when engaging in business development (Bullough *et al.*, 2017b). This is particularly relevant in collectivistic (rather than individualistic) societies characterized by strong cohesive families and groups to which group members show a high degree of loyalty and dependence, as it is the case of Spain (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; House *et al.*, 2004).

In addition, the role of networks as legitimacy providers (Hanson & Blake, 2009; Hughes & Yang, 2020; Rosenbaum, 2017) arises as a salient issue, as female export managers perceive to a higher extent situations related to discrimination based on gender and gendered stereotypes detrimental for their professional activity. Our results relative to these perceptions are consistent with existing literature summarized in Schein's (1973) statement "think manager think male" and later confirmed by multiple studies as, just for instance, Ahl (2006), Bullough *et al.* (2017a) —for managerial positions in general— and Treichal & Brouthers (2004) —for the particular case of internationalization managers. Through their engagement in a formal network (business association, chambers of commerce, exporters partnership, etc.) female managers get legitimacy for themselves as managers and for their firms as exporting companies that can help counterbalance the impact of gendered harmful stereotypes and the experience of discriminatory practices.

Finally, informal networks play a key role as a tool to facilitate the work-family balance. Our results point to no significant differences among female and male managers either to travel and engage in professional activities that may challenge this balance or in terms of institutional support to achieve this balance. It seems, therefore, that the necessary support comes from informal programs and actions related to managers' relational networks. As before mentioned, literature consistently evinces that females take higher family duties and responsibilities to such a point that the Motherhood dimension (Brush *et al.*, 2009) is a key element to be considered when analyzing their business activity. Informal networks developed at the personal (rather than business) level participated by relatives and friends linked by strong affective ties can provide not only direct help to face these responsibilities, but the emotional and psychosocial support needed to reduce females' sense of isolation, boost their confidence to engage in business activities, and support their outside working (Bullough *et al.*, 2017b; Hughes & Yang, 2020). In short, there are gendered differences in work-family responsibilities and commitments that gives rise to the differential use of (and benefit from) different resources (Pergelova *et al.*, 2019), among them the relational networks.

#### **4. Concluding remarks, limitations, and future research**

##### *Concluding remarks*

Our study points to the existence of gendered export manager profiles that differ not only in their objective managerial attributes, but also in their personal traits and subjective perceptions relative to discriminatory practices and detrimental stereotypes. Among the former, differences are found in terms of formal qualification (in favor of females) and professional experience (in favor of males), pointing to a substitution effect among them. A substitution process takes place between the entrepreneurial orientation (females showing a lower level) and the use of networks, whether formal or informal. Females rely on a wider extent on relational networks to access needed resources, get support and legitimacy, and achieve a work-family balance. Consistent with the relevance provided to relational networks, females' personal traits relate to a wider extent with collaborative and interpersonal skills rather than to competitive ones. This is consistent with a relational approach to work that is particularly relevant for SMEs that usually rely on indirect or shared export processes that rely on intermediaries or partners.

Finally, female export managers perceptions relative to the existence of negative gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices are higher than those of their male counterparts. Once again, relational networks can provide the support and legitimacy needed to counterbalance the effect of these practices.

As both profiles seem to be equally valid to engage firms in export activities and achieve export performance (our previous analysis relative to the relationship between the gender of managers and firm's export intensity did not arise statistically significant relationships), it could be interesting for SMEs to rely on export and internationalization teams that encompass managers of both genders and benefit from the combination of diverse managerial attributes, personal traits, and relational processes.

##### *Limitations and avenues for future research*

Our study shows some limitations that make our results no generalizable. First, our sample is limited in terms of context and geographical scope. The data used in our analysis comes from a sample of export managers of Spanish SMEs. As before said, Spain is labelled as a collectivistic nation within existing literature. This collectivistic nature can sharply influence not only the relevance provided to formal and informal networks, but even the social expectations relative to females' engagement in (international) business activities and their role as caregivers and family supporters. These expectations, in turn, can influence some of the managerial attributes analyzed in this article (e.g.: professional experience, international background, entrepreneurial orientation), gender stereotypes,



and behaviors related to discriminatory practices. Therefore, it would be interesting to carry out studies focused on more individualistic societies and check if results differ from ours. Additionally, new studies focused on other collectivistic societies are needed to confirm our results.

Secondly, our sample encompasses exclusively SMEs. It could be expected that larger firms have broader human capital and larger management teams. Being the export or internationalization manager in a large company probably requires higher levels of human capital in terms of qualification, professional experience, and international background, regardless of gender. New studies that analyze if the gendered substitution process between formal qualification and professional experience identified in our study also takes place in larger firms are needed. In addition, large firms are usually less resource-constrained and more firmly established and recognized in their competitive contexts, so it could be expected that their managers do not need external support in terms of resources or legitimacy to get involved in export activities, as export is the internationalization way that requires the lowest level of investment, commitment, and knowledge about the host country, as well as the entry mode that means facing the lowest level of risk. Conversely, large firms usually rely on different entry modes that require higher investments and commitments in the host countries (e.g.: joint ventures, wholly owned subsidiaries); therefore, it is interesting to study if internationalization managers rely on external networks to get involved in these internationalization processes and if there is a gendered difference in the use of these networks.

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