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ACCELERATING MSME INTERNATIONALIZATION THROUGH DIGITAL EXPORT PLATFORMS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Indonesian micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) use Digitalizing export, a private-sector digital export platform, to internationalize, through which mechanisms platform use shapes their export readiness and internationalization pathways, and which barriers constrain these outcomes. Drawing on an integrated lens of the Resource-Based View, the Uppsala model, and the Born-Global perspective, the study adopts an interpretivist qualitative single case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten MSME owners selected through purposive criterion sampling (culinary, fashion, handicrafts, and agribusiness; at least six months of active platform use), participant observation of the platform's services, and analysis of platform and policy documents, and were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: (1) bundled training, certification, and documentation support builds export readiness; (2) verified buyer matchmaking and analytics compress the internationalization process, enabling some firms to reach several foreign markets within their first year of use; (3) the conversion of platform resources into export outcomes is uneven and conditioned by firms' digital literacy, operational readiness, and financing; and (4) trust, payment, and regulatory frictions persist. The study concludes that digital export platforms function as complementary resources rather than equalizers: they lower the liability of outsidership but accelerate internationalization only for firms with sufficient absorptive capacity. The findings inform platform design and call for coordinated public-private capability building within Indonesia's digital trade ecosystem.

Keywords: Digital Export Platform, MSME Internationalization, Export Readiness, Born-Global, Qualitative Case Study, Indonesia.

A. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of internet usage in Indonesia has transformed business ecosystems and social interactions, reshaping how enterprises operate and compete. In January 2024, Indonesia recorded 185.3 million internet users, reflecting the country's increasing digital dependence across sectors (DataReportal, 2024). This transformation affects all economic actors, including micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which must now adapt to technological change to remain competitive in an increasingly interconnected global market (Sirodjudin & Sudarmiatin, 2023). Although MSMEs have long been regulated and supported by government policy, many remain slow to adopt digital transformation strategies, highlighting an urgent need for capacity building and the integration of digital technologies into their business processes (Amalia et al., 2023).

MSMEs play a central role in Indonesia's economy, contributing substantially to gross domestic product, employment, and income distribution (Novitasari, 2022). Their contribution to national exports, however, remained at about 14.4% in 2020 despite a series of national export promotion programs (Heriqbaldi et al., 2023), exposing a significant gap between their strong domestic presence and their limited participation in global markets. This gap is driven by structural constraints, including limited access to international buyers, weak global distribution networks, insufficient export management capabilities, and restricted access to financing and export certification (Fridayani et al., 2024; Wisaka, 2025). Digital export platforms have emerged as one response to these constraints. Unlike general e-commerce marketplaces, these platforms bundle B2B product catalogs, buyer verification, business matchmaking, export training, certification assistance, and links to logistics and government services into a single ecosystem, offering MSMEs a structured pathway into cross-border trade.

International evidence suggests that such digitalization matters for small-firm trade. Firm-level data show that digitalization increases the likelihood that small and medium enterprises export and import, both directly and through productivity gains (Añón Higón & Bonvin, 2024), and digitalization and innovation capabilities are associated with higher export intensity among SMEs in transition economies (Edeh et al., 2025). Reviews of small-firm internationalization likewise identify digital platforms as an increasingly important route to foreign customers that requires fewer resources than traditional exporting (Da Rocha et al., 2024). In Indonesia, the government has promoted partnerships with private platform developers and trade associations to provide training, consulting, and access to international market networks (Zikri, 2024). Yet the adoption of digital export platforms among Indonesian MSMEs remains limited, and persistent barriers such as low digital literacy, financial constraints, and weak operational readiness continue to be reported (Novitasari, 2022; Rosyidah et al., 2023; Wisaka, 2025).

A systematic comparison of prior studies (see Table 1 in the Literature Study) reveals three gaps. First, Indonesian studies have examined digital marketing adoption and MSME digitalization largely in relation to domestic sales and general marketing performance (Amalia et al., 2023; Maylinda & Sari, 2021; Saragih et al., 2024; Supandi & Johan, 2022), or have catalogued export barriers without examining how a specific platform intervenes in them (Fridayani et al., 2024).

Second, the international evidence on digitalization and SME trade is predominantly quantitative and drawn from developed or transition economies (Añón Higón & Bonvin, 2024; Edeh et al., 2025); it establishes that digitalization is associated with export participation but does not explain *how* platform services are used, or why the same platform produces different outcomes for different firms. Third, theoretical explanations remain fragmented: studies typically apply either a resource-based argument (Chen et al., 2024) or an internationalization-process argument (Wisaka, 2025), but rarely examine whether platform-mediated internationalization follows the gradual Uppsala pathway or the accelerated Born-Global pathway, and what firm-level resources condition this.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the case of Digitalizing export, an Indonesian private-sector digital export platform, through user-level qualitative evidence. The study is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) How do Indonesian MSMEs use the services of a digital export platform in their internationalization efforts? (RQ2) Through which mechanisms does platform use shape MSMEs' export readiness and internationalization pathways? (RQ3) What barriers constrain MSMEs from converting platform resources into export outcomes? Correspondingly, the objectives are to describe patterns of platform use, to explain the mechanisms linking platform use to export readiness and market entry, and to identify the conditions under which these mechanisms fail.

The study offers three contributions. Theoretically, it integrates the Resource-Based View, the Uppsala model, and the Born-Global perspective to explain why platform-mediated internationalization is accelerated for some MSMEs but not for others, proposing that platforms reduce the liability of outsidership while firm-level absorptive capacity determines whether this reduction is converted into export outcomes. Empirically, it provides rare user-level qualitative evidence on a bundled export-facilitation platform in an emerging economy, as opposed to general marketplaces. Practically, it offers specific insights for three audiences: MSME owners, regarding the capabilities required before joining such platforms; platform developers, regarding service design for less-ready firms; and policymakers in trade, cooperative, and customs agencies, regarding how public programs can complement private platforms.

B. LITERATURE STUDY

Theoretical Foundation: Integrating RBV, Uppsala, and Born-Global Perspectives

This study draws on three complementary perspectives. The Resource-Based View (RBV) holds that sustained competitive advantage derives from resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). Applied to internationalization, the RBV explains why firms with stronger internal resources and capabilities are more likely to enter foreign markets (Chen et al., 2024). For MSMEs, a digital export platform can be understood as an external, accessible resource bundle; the RBV therefore raises the question of whether, and for whom, such a widely available resource can become a source of advantage.

The Uppsala model conceptualizes internationalization as a gradual process in which firms increase their commitment to foreign markets incrementally as they accumulate experiential knowledge, typically beginning with psychically close markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). The revised model reframes the main obstacle as the *liability of outsidership*, that is, being outside relevant business networks, and positions network relationships as the arena in which knowledge, trust, and commitment develop (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Subsequent work has argued that the model must be adapted to a digital, rapidly changing macro-context (Coviello et al., 2017). By contrast, the Born-Global perspective describes firms that internationalize rapidly, often soon after founding, by leveraging knowledge-intensive capabilities, technology, and networks rather than accumulated experience (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004).

These perspectives are integrated in this study as follows. The Uppsala model (2009 version) and the Born-Global perspective offer competing expectations about the *pace and pathway* of internationalization when MSMEs gain platform-mediated network access, whereas the RBV explains *heterogeneity* in outcomes by directing attention to the firm-level capabilities required to exploit that access. The resulting conceptual lens assumes that digital export platforms may reduce the liability of outsidership by providing verified network access and codified export knowledge, but that the extent to which this produces accelerated, Born-Global-like internationalization depends on firms' absorptive capacity, namely their digital literacy, operational readiness, and financial resources.

MSMEs and Export Competitiveness in Indonesia

Empirical studies from Indonesia consistently show that MSMEs face significant constraints in scaling their operations for export. Heriqbaldi et al. (2023), evaluating national export promotion programs, found that despite policy support the contribution of Indonesian MSMEs to total exports remained 14.4% in 2020, indicating limited program impact. Using NVivo-based qualitative analysis, Fridayani et al. (2024) identified three critical obstacles: a lack of digital and managerial skills among MSME owners, restricted access to financing and export certification, and logistical inefficiencies in supply chains. Comparative evidence shows that these constraints are not unique to Indonesia: internationalization among Taiwanese SMEs depends heavily on internal resources and capabilities (Chen et al., 2024), while digitalization increases small-firm participation in international trade in Spain (Añón Higón & Bonvin, 2024).

Read together, these studies point to a tension that has not been resolved. Government-led export promotion appears to have limited reach (Heriqbaldi et al., 2023), while digitalization is associated with greater trade participation (Añón Higón & Bonvin, 2024). This raises the question of whether privately operated digital platforms can deliver what public programs have not, or whether they encounter the same capability barriers that Fridayani et al. (2024) document. The existing literature does not answer this question because it does not examine platform users directly.

Digital Export Platforms and MSME Internationalization

Digital export platforms integrate multiple value-adding functions, including B2B matchmaking, product promotion, payment solutions, logistics tracking, and buyer verification, which can simplify entry into global supply chains and reduce transaction costs (Da Rocha et al., 2024; Edeh et al., 2025). As digital ecosystems, they coordinate interactions among many actors and can lower information asymmetries between sellers and distant buyers (Gawer, 2021). In the ASEAN context, Rosyidah et al. (2023) identified digital platform participation as a key determinant of MSME internationalization, while also reporting persistent challenges such as limited platform literacy, weak digital marketing skills, and fragmented regional policies.

The literature is not uniformly optimistic, however. Studies that emphasize platform benefits tend to assume that access translates into use, whereas studies of Indonesian MSMEs repeatedly find that awareness of platform functions, financial capacity, and institutional support are limited (Fridayani et al., 2024; Kementerian Koperasi dan UKM RI, 2024). There is also an unresolved theoretical question about whether platforms *disintermediate* exporting, by allowing MSMEs to bypass traditional trade intermediaries, or *re-intermediate* it, by making the platform itself a new and potentially dependency-creating intermediary (Gawer, 2021). Qualitative evidence from users is needed to adjudicate between these interpretations.

Digital Marketing Strategies Within Digital Export Platforms

Digital marketing tools offered through export platforms, such as search optimization, targeted advertising, and social media promotion, can increase product visibility and buyer engagement, particularly when combined with broader digital transformation capabilities (Sharabati et al., 2024). Indonesian studies associate data-driven and integrated online marketing with stronger brand positioning, broader market reach, and higher MSME income (Maylinda & Sari, 2021; Supandi & Johan, 2022), and link digital marketing to export contribution (Saragih et al., 2024). Visibility alone does not secure buyer satisfaction, however: evidence from Indonesian modern retail shows that product assortment and service quality jointly drive satisfaction (Frihatini & Hasanah, 2025), implying that MSMEs must pair online promotion with reliable product offerings and responsive service. Managerial competence and digital leadership further determine whether digital marketing contributes to export-based internationalization (Mala et al., 2024). These studies, however, examine digital marketing in general rather than within a dedicated export platform, and therefore do not show how marketing functions interact with matchmaking, certification, and verification services.

Prior Research, Research Gap, and Positioning of the Study

Table 1 compares the most relevant prior studies with the present study. The comparison shows that existing work is either barrier-focused without examining a specific platform, quantitative and outcome-focused without revealing mechanisms, or concerned with digital marketing rather than bundled export facilitation. Prior qualitative work in Indonesia (Fridayani et al., 2024) established

the barriers facing MSMEs but did not examine how platform users experience and respond to these barriers. The present study is positioned to fill this gap by providing an interpretive, user-level account of how one bundled export platform is used, which mechanisms link use to internationalization, and why outcomes differ across firms.

Table 1.
Comparison of Prior Studies and Positioning of the Present Study

Study	Context and method	Focus and key finding	Limitation addressed by this study
Heriqbaldi et al. (2023)	Indonesia; evaluation of national export promotion programs	MSME export share remained about 14.4% (2020); limited program impact	Public programs only; private platform mechanisms not examined
Fridayani et al. (2024)	Indonesia; qualitative (NVivo)	Skills, financing and certification, and logistics barriers	Barriers catalogued in general; not platform-mediated
Rosyidah et al. (2023)	ASEAN; systematic literature review	Platform participation is a key determinant; literacy and policy barriers	Secondary synthesis; no firm-level primary data
Mala et al. (2024)	Indonesia; export-oriented MSMEs	Digital marketing and digital leadership shape internationalization strategy	Firm-internal capabilities; platform services not examined
Saragih et al. (2024); Maylinda & Sari (2021)	Indonesia; MSME digital marketing	Digital marketing supports sales and export contribution	General digital marketing rather than bundled export facilitation
Añón Higón & Bonvin (2024)	Spain; firm-level quantitative	Digitalization increases export and import participation, partly via productivity	Developed economy; mechanisms at user level unobserved
Edeh et al. (2025)	Transition economies; quantitative	Infrastructure, digitalization, and innovation capabilities drive export intensity	Associations only; no account of how platforms are used
Da Rocha et al. (2024)	Review of small-firm internationalization via digital platforms	Platforms provide a less resource-intensive route to foreign customers	Review; not context-specific primary evidence
Chen et al. (2024)	Taiwan SMEs; RBV	Internal resources drive internationalization	Not platform-specific; single theoretical lens
Present study	Indonesia; interpretivist qualitative single case study	How a bundled export platform is used, mechanisms, and barriers (RQ1 to RQ3)	Integrates RBV, Uppsala, and Born-Global perspectives to explain heterogeneous outcomes

Source: Authors' synthesis of the literature.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Paradigm and Design

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through the meanings that actors attach to their experiences and that knowledge is produced through the interpretation of those meanings in context. This paradigm is appropriate because the research questions concern how MSME owners use and make sense of a digital export platform, rather than the measurement of predefined variables. Within this paradigm, a qualitative single case study design with embedded units of analysis was employed (Yin, 2018). The case is the Digitalizing export platform ecosystem; the embedded units are the ten MSMEs that use it. A case study design suits "how" and "why" questions about a contemporary phenomenon in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). Digitalizing export was selected as an information-rich case because it bundles training, certification support, buyer verification, matchmaking, and links to government services, allowing the mechanisms of interest to be observed within one ecosystem.

Researchers' Role and Reflexivity

Data were collected by members of the research team, who engaged with the Digitalizing export ecosystem as participant observers. The authors are management and business researchers with experience in MSME capacity-building programs. This background facilitated access to and rapport with participants, but it also carried the risk of a favorable predisposition toward digital solutions for MSMEs. To mitigate this risk, the authors (a) triangulated participants' accounts with observation notes and platform documents rather than relying on interviews alone, (b) deliberately examined the data for barriers, negative experiences, and divergent cases, and (c) report alternative interpretations of the findings alongside the main interpretation.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling combined with maximum variation across sectors. The inclusion criteria were: (a) the enterprise qualifies as a micro, small, or medium enterprise under Government Regulation No. 7 of 2021 (Pemerintah Republik Indonesia, 2021); (b) the participant is the owner or main decision-maker responsible for export activities; and (c) the enterprise had actively used Digitalizing export for at least six months, ensuring sufficient experience with its services. Maximum variation was sought across four sectors in which Indonesian MSMEs commonly pursue exports, namely culinary, fashion, handicrafts, and agribusiness, in which Indonesian MSMEs commonly pursue exports. Eligible owners were identified among active users of the platform ecosystem and invited to participate; ten owners who met all criteria agreed to be interviewed. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics shared by the participants. To protect anonymity in a relatively small user community, firm-level details are not reported individually.

Table 2.
Summary of Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Description
Number of participants	Ten MSME owners
Role in the enterprise	Owner or main decision-maker responsible for export activities
Sectors	Culinary, fashion, handicrafts, and agribusiness
Enterprise classification	Micro, small, or medium enterprise under Government Regulation No. 7 of 2021
Platform experience	Active use of Digitalizing export for at least six months
Interview mode	Online semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed

Source: Authors' fieldwork.

Sample Adequacy and Data Saturation

Sample adequacy was assessed using the concept of information power, which holds that fewer participants are needed when the study aim is narrow, participants are highly specific to the aim, the analysis is supported by established theory, and dialogue quality is strong (Malterud et al., 2016). All four conditions applied: the aim focused on one platform; every participant had at least six months of direct experience; the analysis was guided by the RBV, Uppsala, and Born-Global perspectives; and interviews were conducted by researchers experienced in MSME capacity building. Code saturation was not formally tracked during data collection (Guest et al., 2006); sample adequacy is therefore justified primarily on the basis of information power, and the limited number of participants is acknowledged as a limitation. Because the findings rely on ten participants from one platform, they are intended to support analytical rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection

Data were collected using three methods to allow methodological triangulation. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted online. The interview topics (Appendix 1) were organized around four areas aligned with the research questions: (1) the firm's export history and motives for joining the platform; (2) the platform services used and how they were used; (3) perceived changes in export readiness, buyer access, and market entry; and (4) barriers encountered and how participants responded to them. Follow-up probes were used to elicit concrete examples. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Second, participant observation was conducted directly within the Digitalizing export ecosystem to examine its features, services, and digital infrastructure. The observation protocol focused on the digital catalogue system, the buyer verification process, affiliate marketing campaigns, and the content and delivery of export training programs. Observations were documented as field notes. Third, documents were analyzed, including platform reports and promotional materials, user-generated feedback published on the platform, government policy

documents, and industry publications related to MSME export development (Direktorat Jenderal Bea dan Cukai, 2022; Kementerian Koperasi dan UKM RI, 2024). Table 3 summarizes the data sources and their roles in the analysis.

Table 3.
Research Data Sources and Their Use

Data source	Description	Purpose
Semi-structured interviews	Ten MSME owners in culinary, fashion, handicrafts, and agribusiness with at least six months of platform use; conducted online, recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim	Primary data on use, mechanisms, and barriers (RQ1 to RQ3)
Participant observation	Digital catalogue system, buyer verification process, affiliate marketing campaigns, and export training programs; recorded as field notes	Contextualize and verify interview accounts
Documents and secondary data	Platform reports, promotional materials, user feedback, government policy documents, and industry publications on MSME export development	Triangulation and case description
Literature	Studies indexed in Scopus and Google Scholar on MSME digitalization, cross-border e-commerce, and internationalization	Theoretical lens and comparison with prior findings

Source: Authors' own research.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Before each interview, participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the intended use of the data, and gave consent to audio recording. To protect anonymity, individual participants are not identified, and names of firms, brands, and buyers are not reported in this article. Recordings and transcripts were accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The procedure was as follows. (1) Familiarization: the authors read all transcripts and field notes repeatedly and recorded initial analytic memos. (2) Initial coding: transcripts were coded line by line, combining inductive codes generated from participants' accounts with deductive sensitizing concepts drawn from the theoretical lens (for example, "network access," "experiential knowledge," and "internal capability"). Coding was carried out manually by the authors without qualitative data analysis software. (3) Generating candidate themes: related codes were clustered into candidate themes. (4) Reviewing themes: candidate themes were checked against the coded extracts and the full data set, and observation notes and documents were used to corroborate or challenge them. (5) Defining and naming themes. (6) Writing up, during which each theme was described analytically, linked to its codes, corroborated with

observation notes and documents where possible, and examined for divergent cases. Table 4 illustrates the movement from codes to themes.

Table 4.
Coding Structure: From Codes to Themes

Examples of initial codes	Sub-themes	Themes (research question)
Learning export packaging standards; drafting export documents; certification assistance; halal certification	Codified export knowledge; compliance support	Theme 1: Building export readiness through bundled capability support (RQ1, RQ2)
Verified buyer contact; business-matching sessions; reading analytics dashboards; first order within a year	Verified network access; data-driven market selection; accelerated entry	Theme 2: Verified matchmaking and analytics compress internationalization (RQ2)
Difficulty interpreting dashboards; no staff for export; supply capacity limits; prior export experience	Absorptive capacity; operational readiness	Theme 3: Uneven conversion of platform resources into export outcomes (RQ2, RQ3)
Working capital shortages; shipping costs; currency risk; fraudulent buyers; changing regulations	Financial constraints; trust and regulatory uncertainty	Theme 4: Persistent financial, trust, and regulatory frictions (RQ3)

Source: Authors' analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017), as summarized in Table 5. To support dependability, the research procedures, inclusion criteria, data sources, and coding structure are documented transparently in this article (Tables 2 to 5). Member checking and formal peer debriefing were not conducted; this is acknowledged as a limitation.

Table 5.
Strategies Used to Establish Trustworthiness

Criterion	Strategy applied
Credibility	Methodological triangulation across interviews, participant observation, and documents; comparison of interview accounts with observed platform features
Transferability	Thick description of the platform, the Indonesian policy context, and participant characteristics (Table 2) so that readers can judge applicability to other settings
Dependability	Transparent documentation of procedures, data sources, and the coding structure (Tables 2 to 5)
Confirmability	Positionality statement; themes linked to codes and to corroborating observation and document evidence (Table 4); explicit reporting of divergent cases and alternative interpretations

Source: Authors' own research, based on Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Nowell et al. (2017).

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case Context: Digitalizing export as a Digital Export Platform

Digitalizing export is a digital export platform initiated by the Indonesian private sector to support the transformation of MSMEs into globally competitive exporters. It functions as an integrated ecosystem offering end-to-end services for export readiness, including export-oriented training, business matching, product certification support, export facilitation, access to international marketplaces, and assistance with licensing and logistics. The platform collaborates with government institutions such as the Ministry of Industry, Bank Indonesia, and the Directorate General of Customs and Excise (Direktorat Jenderal Bea dan Cukai, 2022), and its stated aims align with national policy goals of increasing MSME exports (Kementerian Koperasi dan UKM RI, 2024). Observation and document analysis showed that its services operate through four interrelated mechanisms: export-focused training and incubation covering international product standards, packaging, branding, halal certification, logistics, and business communication; structured business matching and integration with global e-commerce channels; support for certification and export documentation, together with links to the Online Single Submission (OSS) system, bonded logistics centers (PLB), and fiscal incentives such as the Import Facility for Export Purposes (KITE) for small and medium industries; and digital export communities such as the Indonesian Export Community (KEI) and the Indonesian Export Channel (IEC), which support collective learning and the sharing of market intelligence. The following sections present the four themes that emerged from the analysis. The themes are reported as analytic summaries of participants' accounts, corroborated where possible with observation notes and platform documents; verbatim interview excerpts are not reported (see Conclusions).

Theme 1: Building Export Readiness Through Bundled Capability Support

Participants described the platform's training, certification, and documentation services as the starting point of their export journey. For first-time exporters in particular, the training translated abstract export requirements into concrete practices. Participants reported learning international packaging standards suited to the needs of overseas consumers, how to select efficient freight routes and control logistics costs, how to use trade terminology, and how to draft export documents in line with international requirements. Observation of training sessions confirmed that these topics formed the core curriculum and that sessions were oriented toward MSMEs at an early stage of exporting.

Participants also valued the platform's support in navigating certification and documentation requirements, which they had previously perceived as the most intimidating part of exporting. Export consulting helped them interpret trade regulations and plan logistics, which are challenges commonly cited in prior studies of MSME internationalization (Da Rocha et al., 2024; Fridayani et al., 2024).

In terms of the theoretical lens, this theme shows the platform supplying *codified* export knowledge that the Uppsala model assumes firms must otherwise acquire slowly through experience (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). The bundling of

services matters: participants did not describe training, certification, and documentation as separate services but as a sequence that made exporting appear achievable.

Theme 2: Verified Matchmaking and Analytics Compress Internationalization

The second theme concerns how the platform altered the pace and pathway of market entry. Through structured business-matching activities and integration with global e-commerce channels, registered MSMEs were regularly connected with potential foreign partners. Participants emphasized buyer verification as particularly important, because the fear of fraudulent or unreliable counterparts had previously deterred them from responding to foreign inquiries. Verification mechanisms increased their confidence in cross-border transactions (Saragih et al., 2024).

Participants also used analytics dashboards to track buyer engagement, optimize product catalogs, and identify markets with higher demand, and some described adjusting their pricing and product positioning in response. Several participants reported reaching buyers in Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia within their first year of platform use, often entering more than one market at the same time and with little prior export experience.

This pattern does not follow the gradual, stage-wise sequence of the original Uppsala model, in which firms move from psychically close to more distant markets as experiential knowledge accumulates (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). It aligns more closely with the Born-Global perspective, which describes early and rapid internationalization driven by technology and networks (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004).

Theme 3: Uneven Conversion of Platform Resources into Export Outcomes

The third theme qualifies the first two. Although all participants had access to the same platform services, not all were able to convert them into export outcomes. Participants with higher digital literacy, staff who could manage export tasks, and more mature supply chains used the platform more effectively, translating its tools into export orders and more diversified markets. Others struggled to interpret performance dashboards, keep product catalogs up to date, or manage cross-border logistics, and some lacked a clear understanding of international trade regulations and market-specific compliance requirements despite having attended training.

From the RBV perspective, this theme indicates that a resource available to every user cannot by itself be a source of advantage (Barney, 1991). Value was created when the platform's resources were combined with firm-specific capabilities, consistent with evidence that internationalization depends on internal resources (Chen et al., 2024). The mere availability of platform tools did not automatically yield competitive advantage.

Theme 4: Persistent Financial, Trust, and Regulatory Frictions

The fourth theme concerns barriers that the platform could mitigate only partially. Participants cited insufficient working capital, high international shipping costs, and exposure to currency fluctuations as key challenges, particularly when

attempting to fulfil larger export orders. Although the platform's verification mechanisms reduced some risks, participants still reported concerns about fraudulent buyers, inconsistent payments, international payment systems, competitive price negotiations, and shifting trade regulations.

These frictions lie largely outside the platform's direct control and indicate the need for ecosystem-wide collaboration among platforms, government agencies, and financial service providers to strengthen MSMEs' resilience in international markets.

Discussion: Rethinking Platform-Mediated Internationalization

Taken together, the four themes answer the research questions as follows. MSMEs used the platform primarily as a source of codified export knowledge and verified network access (RQ1). These services shaped internationalization through two mechanisms, building export readiness and compressing market entry, that together enabled some firms to internationalize faster and more broadly than the original Uppsala model would predict (RQ2). The conversion of platform access into export outcomes, however, was constrained by firms' absorptive capacity and by financial, trust, and regulatory frictions (RQ3).

The central interpretation advanced here is that digital export platforms reduce the liability of outsidership (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009) by placing MSMEs inside verified buyer networks and providing codified knowledge that substitutes in part for experiential learning. Where firms possess sufficient internal capabilities, this reduction produces Born-Global-like acceleration (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004); where they do not, platform membership does not translate into exports. The study thus integrates the three perspectives: the Uppsala and Born-Global perspectives describe the possible pathways, and the RBV explains which firms follow which pathway. This extends prior work that has treated digitalization as uniformly beneficial for small-firm trade (Añón Higón & Bonvin, 2024) by showing the firm-level conditions under which the benefit materializes.

Alternative Interpretations and Divergent Cases

Several alternative readings of the findings deserve consideration. First, the accelerated internationalization observed among some participants may partly reflect *selection* rather than platform effects: firms that were already more capable and export-oriented may have been more likely to join the platform and to remain active for six months, which is the inclusion threshold of this study. The data cannot fully separate these explanations, although participants' accounts of what changed after joining (Theme 1) suggest that the platform contributed to readiness rather than merely attracting ready firms.

Second, the findings can be read as consistent with, rather than contrary to, the Uppsala model. The revised model locates internationalization within networks and treats network insidership as the main driver of knowledge and commitment (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Coviello et al., 2017). From this perspective, the platform does not make firms skip stages; rather, it supplies network positions that would otherwise take years to build. Our evidence of early multi-market contacts is compatible with both interpretations, and we therefore describe the observed pattern

as Born-Global-like acceleration made possible by platform-supplied networks, rather than as a refutation of the process view.

Third, early contact with buyers in several regions does not necessarily indicate deep or sustained internationalization. Some first-year market entries may have consisted of sample orders or one-off transactions, and the study did not observe whether these relationships persisted. Fourth, rather than allowing MSMEs to bypass intermediaries altogether, the platform may itself have become a new intermediary on which firms depend for buyer access and verification (Gawer, 2021). Divergence was also visible within the data: participants with lower digital literacy and operational readiness reported that access to training, dashboards, and matchmaking had not yet translated into regular export orders (Theme 3). These alternative interpretations suggest that platform-mediated internationalization is better understood as conditional and possibly fragile than as a general route to rapid export growth.

Implications for Indonesia's Digital Trade Ecosystem

For policymakers, the findings suggest that digital platforms can act as intermediaries that bridge information asymmetries, reduce transaction costs, and offer bundled services including training, mentoring, and business matching (Gawer, 2021; Da Rocha et al., 2024). Trade and cooperative agencies could therefore treat verified private platforms as formal partners in national export strategy rather than relying only on traditional export promotion, whose impact on MSME export share has been limited (Heriqbaldi et al., 2023). Because platform benefits depend on firm capability, inclusive digitalization policy should go beyond infrastructure to include subsidized onboarding, digital-skills and export-readiness programs targeted at less-ready firms, fiscal incentives for certification, and integration of platforms with national systems such as OSS and the Indonesia National Single Window (INSW). Interoperability between public and private systems and simplified e-certification would reduce the regulatory frictions identified in Theme 4, and a national coordination framework for digital export platforms, similar to regulatory sandboxes used in financial technology, could support controlled experimentation and cross-sector alignment.

For platform developers, Theme 3 implies that services should be differentiated by firm readiness, for example through simplified dashboards, assisted catalog management, and staged pathways for first-time exporters, and that access to trade finance and payment protection should be strengthened. For MSME owners, the findings indicate that joining a platform is not sufficient: building basic digital literacy, production capacity, and working capital before or alongside platform adoption increases the likelihood that platform access will translate into export orders. Platform providers and MSME users could also co-create services through communities and feedback loops, ensuring that support is demand-driven and responsive to market dynamics.

D. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how Indonesian MSMEs use the Digitalizing export platform, through which mechanisms platform use shapes their internationalization,

and which barriers constrain these outcomes. The findings show that the platform builds export readiness through bundled training, certification, and documentation support, and compresses internationalization through verified matchmaking and analytics, enabling some MSMEs to enter several foreign markets within their first year. These benefits are uneven: they materialize mainly for firms with adequate digital literacy, operational readiness, and financing, while financial, trust, and regulatory frictions persist. The study contributes to theory by integrating the RBV, Uppsala, and Born-Global perspectives into a conditional account in which platforms reduce the liability of outsidership and firm-level capabilities determine whether this produces accelerated internationalization. Digital access alone does not guarantee export success; complementary investment in skills, operational readiness, and regulatory support is essential.

The study has several limitations. It examines a single platform and ten participants, so its findings support analytical rather than statistical generalization. The data rely largely on participants' self-reports and on publicly available platform documents, as internal platform performance data were not accessible. Verbatim participant quotations are not reported, which limits readers' ability to assess the interpretations directly against participants' own words. Member checking and formal peer debriefing were not conducted, and code saturation was not formally tracked. The six-month inclusion criterion may have favored more successful or committed users, and the cross-sectional design did not allow the durability of early export relationships to be observed. Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal qualitative designs that follow MSMEs from platform onboarding over several years, phenomenological approaches that capture in depth, and in participants' own words, how owners experience their first export transactions, and multiple-case comparisons across platforms and countries. Mixed-methods designs that combine rich participant accounts with transaction-level platform data could also test whether the capability conditions identified here explain differences in export performance.

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