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Employing brand governance mechanisms with export channel partners: What are the performance consequences and contingent effects?

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ABSTRACT

For decades leading international business scholars have assessed the benefits accruing from successful governance mechanisms. Although the critical importance of initiating and maintaining good relationships with export channel partners is recognized within the literature, there has been little research focus placed on the optimal approach for governing intangible aspects of these relationships. We offer the first integrated definition of export brand governance of channel partners (EBGoCP) and investigate its influence on export performance. Drawing from relational governance theory and contingency theory, we develop and test a model of the contingent effects of different country specific advantages and firm characteristics on the performance upshots of EBGoCP. Using survey data from UK exporters, our findings validate the hypothesized enhancing effects of EBGoCP on export performance outcomes. Furthermore, consistent with our contingency based predictions, we find country-of-origin-image, firm size and scope of exporting moderate the impact of EBGoCP on export performance. Along with providing fresh insights from the results, this study opens up a new stream of international business governance research and offers productive future research paths to follow.

1. Introduction

Branding is an important intangible asset (Ghauri, Strange, & Cooke, 2021) which offers firm-specific advantages (FSAs) (Rugman & Verbeke, 2008). From an international business (IB) perspective, branding in the cross-border context is critically important as intangible assets can positively affect a firm's performance when deployed across international borders (Verbeke & Brugman, 2009). However, "the competitive environment in which global brands operate is complex, and the nature of global branding is multifaceted" (Chabowski, Samiee, & Hult, 2013, p. 623). The reasoning for pushing forward the boundaries of IB investigation into branding is transparent; put simply, "the brand has come to be regarded as one of the firm's main assets leading to a sustainable competitive advantage" (Ghauri & Elg, 2018, p. 47). Yet, there is a deficiency of IB research examining brand related benefits and intangible assets have not been fully incorporated into the theory of international trade (Fu & Ghauri, 2020). The paucity of IB studies examining this critical area is surprising since the pivotal role of branding in IB has been accepted for a long time (c.f. Efrat & Asseraf, 2019). In the dynamic contemporary IB environment, a foremost challenge for firms is the creation of strong brands and achieving an understanding of their effects (Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides, & Veloutsou, 2019). Given the prevalence of using channel partners in order to compete in overseas markets, the outcomes of exporters' branding efforts are not always explicitly clear. For instance it is often difficult to ascertain the degree to which channel partners are effectively upholding the firms' brand meaning and values and what effect this has on performance. What is known is that the development of strong cross-border relationships with channel partners has become crucially important (Ju & Gao, 2017) and this is particularly relevant for international brands. The approaches firms employ to govern interfirm relationships relates to interorganizational governance; however, its effect on firm performance is still inconclusive (Jean, Kim, Lien, & Ro, 2020). Therefore, this echoes the need for further branding research within this important area. Consequently, novel new approaches and fresh insights which can ignite a wave of scholarly interest in this research space are overdue.

Fundamentally, the manner by which a product or service is sold or distributed can have a profound impact on the equity and ultimately the success of a brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). The key to a successful channel relationship requires the supplier to ensure their channel partners are committing appropriate efforts into the promotion of its brand (Obadia & Stöttinger, 2015); therefore, making it a clear priority

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for managers. Internationalization through exporting can limit a firm's effectiveness at enhancing its brand through channel partners which act as a filter for the firm's end customers (Pegan, Vianelli, & de Luca, 2020). Consequently, a major challenge for exporters is to determine if their channel partners are diligently fulfilling their obligations (e.g., Sachdev & Bello, 2014) and conveying the exporting firm's brand values and meaning as expected. Studies adopting the relational governance perspective have drawn attention to the business benefits of building and maintaining relational connections between buyers and suppliers (e.g., Sheng, Zhou, & Li, 2011). Moreover, research has demonstrated that relational governance mechanisms positively interact with the governance of intangible assets (e.g., brands) but not with tangible property based assets (Hoetker & Mellewigt, 2009). However, few IB studies have explicitly considered export channel partner relationships and no prior research has considered brand related benefits accruing from implementing export channel partner relational governance mechanisms. By overlooking branding when considering inter-firm relationships, prior investigations have provided an incomplete understanding (Ghauri & Elg, 2018). In the business-to-business (B2B) context, "the whole domain of governance within buyer, within seller, and for buyer–seller relationships across the customer journey stages remains an open area for research" (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021, p. 102). Recent research has indicated that relational governance is not effective for shorter term relationships; instead, becoming effective in the long run (Ju & Gao, 2017). Relatedly, B2B relationships are characterized by being long-term (Dotzel & Shankar, 2019), which supports the case for a domain specific investigation. Therefore, we address a striking gap in the IB and marketing literatures by examining the deployment of brand governance mechanisms to international B2B channel partners. Governance mechanisms are defined as "the tools, devices, and tactics available to managers to regulate the conduct of the exchange relation" (Colm, Ordanini, & Bornemann, 2020, p. 108). We conceptualize brand governance mechanisms within our research framework and consider their influence on export performance, taking account of contingent internal characteristics of the firm and external environmental conditions.

There are many benefits to be gained from exporting; evidently, it permits firms entry into a broad range of new potentially lucrative markets. Furthermore, exporting allows for the realization of benefits of economies of both scope and scale, experiential learning, the opportunity to diversify revenue streams and the ability to reduce the risks attached to being dependant on their domestic market (Krammer, Strange, & Lashitew, 2018). It has long been held that export transactions are characterized by cultural and geographic separation between suppliers and buyers (Perry, 1992). When it comes to IB relationships; "the very essence of modern business centers on forming, developing and maintaining sound inter-organizational relationships" (Leonidou, Aykol, Spyropoulou, & Christodoulides, 2019, p. 198). Clearly, it is then of critical importance that channel partner relationships have strong foundations built on trust, commitment and cooperation. Despite its obvious importance, there has been limited research focusing on export channel partners and this is an undeveloped area. For example, a recent wide ranging review of empirical research on export channel selection between 1979 and 2015 concluded there are relatively few studies and overall the area is unexplored (Li, He, & Sousa, 2017).

This study contributes to the extant literature in four important ways. First, we build upon the IB perspective that branding is a non-location bound FSA representing a competitive advantage that can be transferred across locations at relatively low cost, deployed and profitably exploited (Rugman, Verbeke, & Nguyen, 2011). IB studies have investigated relationship building for strategic brand management (Tsai, 2011) and international marketing research has examined the link between strategic brand management and export performance (Pyper, Doherty, Gounaris, & Wilson, 2020). However, there has not yet been any scholarly focus placed on the important area of exporters' brand governance of their export channel partners. As established by leading scholars of governance such as Bob Tricker who first coined the phrase "corporate governance"; the terms "management" and "governance" should not be conflated (c.f. Tricker & Tricker, 2015). Generally, governance is viewed as a controlling mechanism; however, scholars have expanded upon this viewpoint to focus on 'softer' relational governance mechanisms (Renton & Richard, 2020). Specifically, trust, commitment and cooperation are key factors in relation to relational governance (e.g. Palmatier, Dant, & Grewal, 2007), where trust refers to the aspect of confidence in exchange relationships and commitment and cooperation are symbiotic (Aulakh, Kotabe, & Sahay, 1996). Arguably, relational governance has never been more important to exporters, given that the ability to rely on external relationships with export channel partners is crucial to an organization's long term success (Moeller, Harvey, Griffith, & Richey, 2013). Therefore, we provide a vital contribution to the IB literature by providing the first empirical examination of the influence that brand governance of export channel partners has on export performance.

Secondly, the study makes a valuable contribution to export governance and brand measurement by defining, developing and testing a new export brand governance of channel partners (EBGoCP) construct. We have demonstrated the potential applicability within our model and then examined its usefulness in explaining export performance within our empirical study. This represents a significant difference from previous work, and provides an advancement of our understanding of the export performance pay-offs of EBGoCP. In doing so we have responded to calls for channel research into supplier brands and how these can be integrated into current nomological networks (Watson, Worm, Palmatier, & Ganesan, 2015). Thirdly, an important contribution of this study is that we consider the role of key moderating variables (foreign market competitiveness, country of origin image (COI), export intensity, scope of exporting and firm size), to better understand some of the important contingent factors that explain the complex relationship between the EBGoCP and export performance. The theoretical advancement of export channel research using moderators is scarce and leading IB scholars have recently called for more studies to address this conspicuous deficiency in the literature (c.f. Li et al., 2017). By using both internal and external moderators, we provide a contribution to answering these calls. Lastly, we have developed a novel conceptual model which offers an operational representation of the EBGoCP construct. This will serve to inform researchers about the robust foundations upon which this research concept is built and can be extended pending future studies that we hope our study will stimulate in this area.

The remainder of the manuscript is organized as follows. First, we begin by providing details of pertinent literature and the theoretical foundations for this study. Then we present our conceptual framework and introduce the focal constructs, and, develop our hypotheses. Next we describe our methodological approach and proceed to report the results from our hypothesis tests. We then provide a comprehensive discussion of the results and provide both theoretical and managerial implications stemming from our work. We finish by detailing some of the limitations of this study and providing suggestions to signpost future avenues of research.

2. Pertinent literature

Customers expect a consistent brand experience but a growing number of international distribution and communication channel touchpoints puts the consistency of key brand values at risk (Helm & Jones, 2010a). Since the performance of a brand is also dependant on the actions taken by outside suppliers and partners, firms must govern these relationships prudently (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Therefore, the protection of an exporter's crucial brand meaning and values while in relationships with external channel partners is a question of brand governance (e.g., Renton & Richard, 2020).

Within IB literature, the terminology for export channels and intermediaries is often inconsistent and differing terms are used interchangeably; therefore, we provide clarity about this. Export channels can be broadly identified by three major types, (1) indirect exports, (2) direct export and (3) cooperative export (Kotabe & Helsen, 2020). Indirect export channels refer to when a firm does not take much involvement with its own exporting activities, instead employing another domestic firm or agent such as an export management company or trading company to perform these duties: "in indirect channels firms sell to a middleman, agent or distributor who exports for them to the target countries" (Li et al., 2017, p. 309). Indirect export channels are also referred to as 'domestically based export intermediaries' (Peng & Ilinitch, 1998). Direct export channels relates to when the exporting firm is more involved with its exporting activities and is in direct contact with intermediaries such as agents and distributors in the foreign target market. This can involve, exporting "through a company-owned sales-force/distribution channel located overseas in a direct export channel" (Li et al., 2017, p. 309). Direct export channels are also referred to in IB literature as 'overseas-based import intermediaries' (Peng & Ilinitch, 1998). With regards to cooperative export, this involves collaborative agreements with other firms (local or foreign) such as marketing groups concerning export functions. Subsequently, there is no universally agreed typology of 'channel structure'; however, the most commonly used is the direct/indirect channel classification (Li et al., 2017).

There is a lack of consensus amongst scholars about which channel governance structure (direct or indirect) has the greatest impact on export performance (Rambocas, Meneses, Monteiro, & Brito, 2015). In our study we do not differentiate between export channel partners which fit within the different export channel classifications. Regardless of whether they have operations based in the exporter's domestic market or within the export destination market, we view the role of both main classifications of export channel partners including; intermediaries, middlemen, distributors and agents as holding mutual importance to a B2B exporter's brand success in foreign markets. Therefore, in the interests of consistency, we will mainly refer to the different export channel categorizations as export channel partners.

Clear distinctions can be made between B2B and business-to-consumer (B2C) markets, for instance firms in B2B markets form long-term deeper relationships with customers, and it is normal to have high levels of reciprocal buyer–seller loyalty (c.f. Zhang, Netzer, & Ansari, 2014; Dotzel & Shankar, 2019). Within the B2B setting, the relationship (involving an ongoing exchange of resources) between the parties involved is considered to be a critical determinant of success (Beitelspacher, Baker, Rapp, & Grewal, 2018). However, Moorman & Day (2016) identified that the literature has not considered how B2B firms can keep their values focused on both their B2B partners and ultimate end customers to best maximize performance. While there is a rich history of studies available to draw from in the area of buyer-seller relationships focused on channels of distribution in B2B markets (c.f. Cannon & Perreault, 1999), surprisingly, none have addressed export brand governance for B2B channel partner relationships. Previous work has investigated B2B governance structures and marketing strategy (Paswan, Guzmán & Blankson, 2012) as well as power symmetry and the development of trust in interdependent B2B relationships (Cuevas, Julkunen, & Gabrielsson, 2015). It has been suggested that B2B firms may benefit from working more closely with their channel partners to ensure they have an understanding of the brand strategies being adopted (Meehan & Wright, 2012). Additionally, studies have indicated interesting results about effectively meeting short and long term objectives by investigating the impact of channel governance structures (direct or indirect) on export performance (Rambocas et al., 2015). However, in terms of specifically examining the export performance outcomes resulting from effective brand governance on B2B export channel partners, to our knowledge there has been no prior research work; therefore, our study addresses a pivotal gap in the literature.

3. Theoretical foundations

An expansive definition of governance is offered as "a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing the initiation, termination and ongoing relationship maintenance between a set of parties" (Heide, 1994, p. 72). Relational governance conveys "interfirm exchange which includes significant relationship-specific assets" which "is embodied in both the structure and the process of an interorganizational relationship" (Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995, p. 374). With regard to a brand specific context, "branding governance is concerned with an organization wide approach to the process of planning, structuring, executing and measuring brand policy" (Ind & Bjerke, 2007, p. 2). Building upon these definitions, we offer an integrated definition of export brand governance of channel partners, hereafter referred to as 'EBGoCP' as "an all-encompassing mechanism for initiating, maintaining and monitoring the ongoing brand relationship with export channel partners". Underpinning our study are two theoretical perspectives; relational governance (e.g., Lumineau & Henderson, 2012) and contingency theory (Donaldson, 2001).

Relational governance has received substantial attention in the IB literature, including a conceptualization of relational governance in foreign distributor relationships (Roath, Miller & Cavusgil, 2002). However, despite the wide body of prior work underpinned by relational governance theory (c.f. Sheng et al. 2011), our study represents the first time that the theoretical perspective of relational governance has been applied within an export brand governance setting. Relational governance transcends contractual terms and emphases self-regulation and trust (Wang, Zhang, & Jiang, 2019). The relational governance perspective indicates that relational norms of flexibility, commonality and information exchange are established as partners transact satisfactorily over time (Griffith & Myers, 2005). The maxim of relational governance permeates interorganizational relationship performance literature from various business standpoints, for example; solution offering between suppliers and customers in the B2B context (Colm et al., 2020), dealing with institutional distances in international marketing channels (Yang, Su & Fam, 2012) and negotiation strategy in buyer-supplier dispute (Lumineau & Henderson, 2012).

Relational governance encompasses the exchange of tacit information and transaction-specific investments (Strange & Humphrey, 2019). As such, exporters must invest time and effort to build relational governance structures with their channel partners which inevitably results in them becoming more dependent on their partners because the process of building relational unions with a new partner would involve further investments (Palmatier *et al.* 2007). Therefore, the development of brand governance mechanisms initially requires a high degree of commitment and trust in the export channel partners. Relational governance is reflective of the degree to which mutual actions are established in a business relationship (Bensaou & Venkatraman, 1995). It has been shown that relational governance can positively affect firm performance (Claro, Hagelaar, & Omta, 2003). Further studies have utilized relationship governance theory to confirm the positive effects of good business relationships with both buyers and suppliers on business performance (e.g. Sheng, Zu and Li, 2011) and the positive impact of relational governance on channel performance (Yang et al., 2012). Informed by the benefits which can be accrued from adopting the relational governance perspective in other contexts, we posit that EBGoCP can have a positive influence on export performance.

The theoretical perspective of contingency theory suggests that the link between independent and dependant variables is also influenced by further contingent variables (e.g. Donaldson, 2001). These contingent variables are referred to as moderators. Leading exporting scholars have called for more studies using moderators to gain a better understanding of the relationships between antecedents and export performance which will in turn enrich extant theories (Chen, Sousa, & Xinming, 2016). In relation to our focal construct EBGoCP, it has been suggested that future studies should specifically consider the external environmental moderators - competitive intensity and country of origin (COO) related factors - when investigating the effects of brand relationships in overseas markets (Nyadzayo, Matanda, & Ewing, 2011). These are two of the most commonly used and important moderating variables within the extant exporting literature. When considering factors external to the firm, contingency theory stipulates that the environment in which a firm operates will influence their strategic decisions and subsequent performance outcomes (e.g. Child, 1972; Bahadir, Bharadwaj, & Srivastava, 2015). However, relevant internal firm contingencies should also be considered (e.g. Gnizy, Cadogan, Oliveira, & Nizam, 2017). Contingency theory is an accepted theoretical standpoint for assessing different aspects of IB, for instance export market orientation (c.f. İpek & Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2019) and cultural and internal business (c.f. Srivastava, Singh, & Dhir, 2020). Importantly, with respect to our study, it is held that contingency theory; "posits that each firm's export performance is dependent on the context in which the firm operates" (Robertson & Chetty, 2000, p. 211). This context includes both external and internal factors (Van de Ven, Ganco, & Hinings, 2013). It is our interest to investigate the moderating role of key contingency variables which can impact performance levels resulting from our predictor variable EBGoCP. Therefore, we assess the link between EBGoCP on export performance using moderators representing both external and internal firm contextual contingencies.

4. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Consistent with the theoretical perspectives of relational governance and contingency theory, our conceptual model indicates that EBGoCP will have a direct effect on export performance but this effect is contingent on both external and internal factors related to the exporting firm. Fig. 1.

4.1. Export performance

Export performance is one of the leading trends of IB research (Rialp, Merigó, Cancino, & Urbano, 2019). More than ten years since Verbeke & Brugman (2009, p. 270) stated "the measurement of performance in IB studies is far from standardized", there is still no consensus on what key performance measures should be used. This is surprising given that it has long been recognized that a pinnacle of IB research is to resolve the question of why some firms perform better than others (Hult et al., 2008). There have been numerous IB studies which use export intensity as the dependant variable signifying exporting performance (c.f. Krammer et al., 2018). However, arguably export intensity does not properly capture the multi-dimensional nature of export performance. Other IB studies have used accounting measures for export performance such as return on sales (ROS) and return on assets (ROA) (e.g. Boehe & Jiménez, 2016). Further, IB scholars have taken a multi-dimensional approach to export performance, inclusive of both market and financial measures. Examples of these include; export profitability, market diversification, export growth and export intensity (Robertson & Chetty, 2000), or sales growth, market share growth, profit growth and return on investment (ROI) (Li, Zhou & Wu, 2017). We concur with this logic and adopt the approach of utilizing multiple measures representing different aspects of both market and financial export performance.

4.2. The role of export brand governance on increasing export performance

"Channel relationships are often characterized by discord and a lack of cooperative behaviors, making the study of channel performance a priority" (Gilliland & Bello, 2015, p. 190). Good governance is a way to iron out divergences between channel partners and in relation to exporting, improved channel performance is a precursor to increased export performance. Prior studies have established that the quality of an exporter's relationship with its intermediary channel partners can effect important outcomes such as its level of growth in the foreign market and its export sales and profits (Ural, 2009). When considering distribution (channel partners), focus should also be placed on branding (Tesfom, Lutz, & Ghauri, 2004). Brand governance relates to the control of organizational brand policy. In the B2B context, this involves suppliers prioritizing the consistent messaging of their brand meaning and values together (Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan, & Merrilees, 2018). For overseas buyers, intermediary channel partners act as the primary representative of an exporter's brand. Therefore, these channel partners play a key role and can ultimately determine the level of success a brand can achieve in foreign markets. Before proceeding, it is worth clarifying which important aspects of branding good governance should cover. The quintessential view expressed by academics who are at the heart of the study of branding is that brand relationships, effectively conveying a

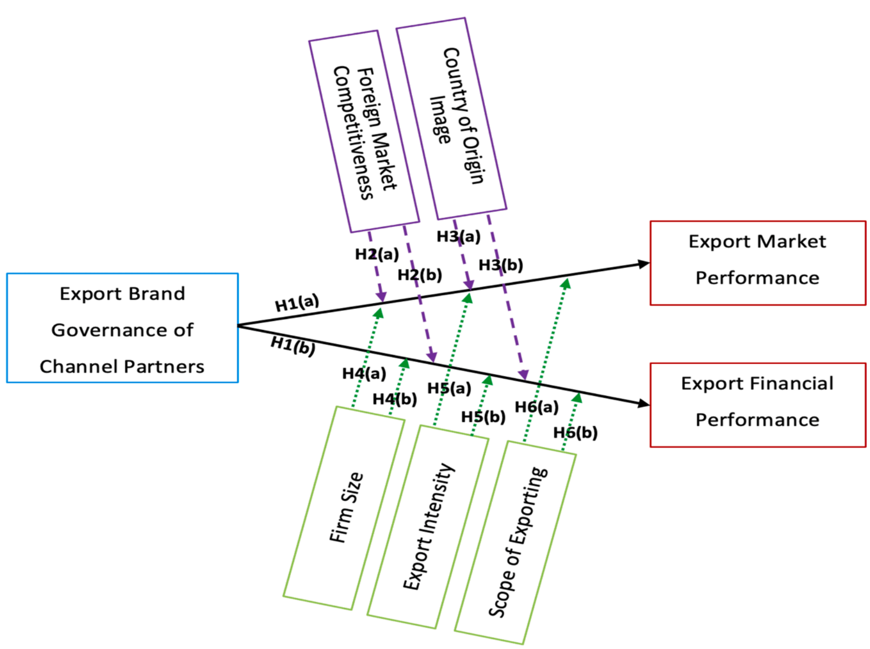

Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

brand's meaning and values, and eliciting brand responses are key components which should be considered (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Previous research in the B2B domain has investigated how firms' internal branding efforts can be directly targeted at employees, specifically communicating the brand 'meaning and values' (Baker, Rapp, Meyer, & Mullins, 2014). The aim of this approach is to reduce the variance of the brand meaning and values expressed by frontline staff to the ultimate customers. Baker et al.'s (2014) findings reveal consistent brand information leads to brand led performance payoffs. We assess that this logic should also broadly apply to channel partners. Although not employed by the firm, they represent the brand in export markets.

It stands to reason that if the governance of important channel partner relationships is deficient, then this can result in lower levels of export performance. This will apply to an exporters existing activities, but importantly there are also future implications of weak governance. Exporters that treat their channel partners poorly will cultivate bad reputations which will harm their long-term ability to add or manage channels in the future (Palmatier, Stern, & El-Ansary, 2016). Relational governance enables a stronger connection between exporters and channel partners which leads to improved processes and products through a greater exchange of knowledge and information (e.g. Navas-Alemán, 2011). Information sharing including brand pertinent knowledge, is not limited to top-down from the exporters to the channel partner, it also applies to bottom-up (upgrading) (c.f. De Marchi, Di Maria, Golini, & Perri, 2020). Channel commitment can be explained by the loyalty of channel partners (Gilliland & Bello, 2002). Therefore, monitoring (verification that agreed behaviors are being upheld) and information sharing are important governance mechanisms to encourage commitment and cooperation from exporter channel partners (Sachdev & Bello, 2014). Increased levels of relationship commitment contribute to improved export performance (Styles, Patterson, & Ahmed, 2008).

In light of the aforementioned considerations, we argue that exporters should first build strong relationships with their channel partners and secondly provide them with training on their brand meaning, consequently sharing information about their brand values. Furthermore, exporters should monitor that their brand meaning and values are being adequately upheld by their channel partners. Finally, reciprocal information sharing should be sought from channel partners in the form of feedback relating to how well an exporters international branding programs are being received. With reference to the theoretical benefits of relational governance, these actions will therefore be expected to lead to increased levels of export performance. Brands provide an important contribution to firm performance (Morgan & Rego, 2009) and relational governance is positively associated with increased levels of export performance (Ju & Gao, 2017). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. EBGoCP is positively related to export (a) market performance (b) financial performance.

4.3. The contingent role of external factors on the EBGoCP-export performance link

We consider that both host country and home country external factors will be important to the EBGoCP-export performance link. Specifically, we suggest that the levels of competition in foreign markets (host countries) and the COI effect derived from the home country will both have an important contingent effect on this link. Both of these external factors are deemed important by the export literature.

4.3.1. Foreign Market Competitiveness

Foreign market competition denotes the degree of intensive competition which exists in overseas markets (Li, Poppo, & Zhou, 2008). Intensive competition propagated through competitive rivalries is considered an industry-related uncertainty that leads to further risks in the foreign market environment (Ozkan, 2020). Increased competitive intensity is regularly depicted by greater levels of rivalry among firms, in the form of price wars, extra promotional activities such as advertising, more product and service offerings and increased transactions (Jean, Kim, & Cavusgil, 2020). Interestingly, a hostile competitive foreign environment does not necessarily equate to negative outcomes. For instance, results from Robertson and Chetty's (2000) export channel focused study show entrepreneurial firms can achieve similar levels of export performance regardless of the competitive foreign environment. Prior studies have shown that higher levels of competitive intensity in export markets actually heightens the positive link between export market orientation behavior and export sale performance (Cadogan, Sundqvist, Puumalainen, & Salminen, 2012). Therefore, exporters which operate in more competitive environments will gain the most benefits from developing higher levels of export market orientation behavior. We argue that this will also apply to exporters which have higher levels of EBGoCP, since to compete in more competitive markets firms look to their brands as key to developing relationships with buyers (Helm & Jones, 2010b). In support of our view, a recent IB study successfully tested hypotheses based on the presumption that "foreign market competition may further enhance the importance of relationships with foreign distributors or agents" (Jean, Kim, & Cavusgil, 2020, p. 3).

When discussing Rugman's FSA/country-specific advantage (CSA) matrix, Rugman and Verbeke (2008) identify branding as an FSA. The authors discuss that cell 3, 'where both firm and country factors matter', is a unique cell relevant to scholarly work on IB strategy, and will include FSAs such as higher order governance capabilities (Rugman et al. 2011). We assess that this is especially relevant when considering the importance of EBGoCP as a higher order FSA and foreign market competitiveness as an external country specific contingency. Within increasingly competitive environments, strong brands can enable firms to prosper by offering protection against competitors while also increasing market share (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). While they might appear counterintuitive our predictions are grounded in the aforementioned literatures. We expect that the relationship between EBGoCP and export performance is more positively correlated when foreign market competitiveness is high. In other words, under high foreign market competitiveness conditions, EBGoCP is more important and influential on export performance, than under conditions of low foreign market competitiveness. Therefore, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 2. Foreign market competitiveness positively moderates the relationship between EBGoCP and export (a) market performance (b) financial performance.

4.3.2. Country-of-origin image

An accumulation of knowledge on the subject of country-of-origin (COO) dating back to the 1960′s means the literature is vast. In fact, the COO construct is one of the most researched in international marketing (Diamantopoulos, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, & Moschik, 2020). However, research into the COO effect continues to evolve and interest in this important area persists. Within the IB literature, research has shown that; firms from the same country tend to employ similar business practices (Zhang, Zhou, van Gorp, & van Witteloostuijn, 2020), a brand's COO can be an important influencing factor when considering cultural stereotypes (c.f. Chabowski *et al.* 2013) and that COO is an important moderator of performance when considering a firm's antecedent internal resources in the B2B domain (La, Patterson, & Styles, 2009). However, fundamental disparities between the inherent outlooks and routines of different countries, can profoundly influence governance (Buckley & Strange, 2011). This is reinforced by the fact that there can be considerable variance between the characteristics and dynamics of exporters from different countries (Fernandes, Freund, & Pierola, 2016). We believe perception of exporters COO by their channel partners will influence the performance outcomes of their EBGoCP. Prior studies have investigated the impact of COO on the acceptance of foreign subsidiaries in host countries (e.g. Moeller et al., 2013) but no research has looked how it effects the influence of EBGoCP on export performance.

It is accepted in the IB literature that "COO and country-of-origin image (COI) are two inextricably related constructs" (Costa, Carneiro, & Goldszmidt, 2016, p. 1067). Scholars such as Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) have offered differences between COO and COI, for example COO being more focused on the effects of the national origin of the product and COI instead intending to clarify which aspects of the country influence buyers perceptions. However, there appears to be confluence within the literature. For instance, Chen, Su, & Lin (2011) operationalize a robust construct which they refer to as COO, but the measurement items can be seen to originate from prior studies which pertain to COI (e.g., Parameswaran & Pisharodi, 1994). Likewise La et al. (2009) use the term COO but go on to examine the moderating effect of 'image' from COO and state their items are taken from Parameswaran and Pisharodi (1994). It is not the intention of our study to revisit intersecting discussions about COO and COI. Our study is underpinned by the theoretical concept of relational governance and we are interested in the relational effectiveness of brand governance; therefore, appropriately we focus on the 'people facet' and utilize concise COI measures using cognitive and affective components of country image (e.g., Chen et al., 2011; La et al., 2009). Going forward we will refer to our moderator as COI. In recent years an emergent view identifies COI as a CSA (Suter, Borini, Floriani, da Silva, & Polo, 2018), which can provide firms with a form of competitive advantage or disadvantage (Cuervo-Cazurra & Un, 2015). For the purposes of our study this is not the perspective we adopt; however we can see merit in these scholars viewpoint.

It has been established that "perceived brand origin strongly affects brand attitudes, and this happens regardless of the perceptions' objective accuracy" (Magnusson, Westjohn, & Zdravkovic, 2011, p. 454). Brand origin impacts brand credibility (Samiee, Katsikeas, & Hult, 2021). Recently, positive COI has been shown to stimulate interest in brands and increase buyers and other stakeholders willingness to learn about a brand (Fregidou-Malama & Hyder, 2021). Therefore, confirming the relevance of COI to our study and why it is important we consider its moderating effects. We bridge the COI, branding and governance literatures by suggesting that COI can strengthen the positive influence EBGoCP can have on export performance. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3. COI positively moderates the relationship between EBGoCP and export (a) market performance (b) financial performance.

4.4. The contingent role of firm characteristics on the EBGoCP-export performance link

4.4.1. Firm size

It is recognized in the IB literature that firm size does not mandate the use of intermediaries; small firms and larger firms alike use export channel partners (Suwannarat, 2016). In order for exporters to support and promote their brand in foreign markets, they should make significant investments into human capital to support the development of their relationships with intermediary channel partners (Bello and Gilliland, 1997). Larger firms will likely have more resources at their disposal to make financial and people based investments in their exporting activities. Further, "larger suppliers have the resources to make investments in branding that reduce their dependence on a [channel partner]; they may be more successful in directly extracting hostages than smaller firms and thus be less dependent on bilateral governance mechanisms to protect their vulnerable assets"(Subramani & Venkatraman, 2003, p. 52). Additionally, in terms of governance, export relationships normally require a high level of specific investments committed to foreign markets which have a higher level of uncertainty compared with domestic markets. Therefore, the costs associated with establishing and maintaining these governance mechanisms can be out of reach for small firms (Majocchi, Bacchiocchi, & Mayrhofer, 2005). Given its importance as a contingent variable firm size has been used extensively as a moderator for the past three decades within studies of export performance (c.f. Sousa, Martinez-Lopez, & Coelho, 2008; Chen et al., 2016). Therefore, we argue that firm size will be an important moderator for our study:

Hypothesis 4. Firm size positively moderates the relationship between EBGoCP and export (a) market performance (b) financial performance.

4.4.2. Export intensity

In the IB literature, export intensity reflects the degree to which a firm is involved and committed to foreign markets. It is widely accepted by scholars working in this area that export intensity can be determined by taking export sales as a percentage of total sales revenue (e.g., Haahti, Madupu, Yavas, & Babakus, 2005; Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2015; Krammer et al., 2018; Wang, Kafouros, Yi, Hong, & Ganotakis, 2020); therefore, appropriately this is the measure that we adopt. It is also referred to by IB scholars in relation to multinationality, "multinationality has been measured as the ratio of size of foreign operations to total operations, and this has become known as the 'degree of internationalization' (DI). DI has been operationalized in many different ways such as foreign sales over total sales" (Verbeke & Brugman, 2009, p. 268). Prior studies have examined determinants of export intensity, export intensity as a performance outcome, or as an antecedent to export performance (c.f. Wang & Ma; 2018). It is generally understood that increasing export intensity should enhance an exporters performance since this will provide the ability to optimize the cost to benefit ratio from their international business and subsequently lead to increased performance (Beleska-Spasova, Glaister, & Stride, 2012). However, previous studies have overlooked the important contingent role export intensity can play in moderating the effect of exogenous variables on export performance. Arguably, the more committed a firm is to exporting, raises the emphasis on the governance of their exporting activities and the enhancement of their performance outcomes. Exporters can expect yearly increases in their brand building and maintenance costs (Morgan, Slotegraaf, & Vorhies, 2009). However, B2B marketing expenditure is not evaluated against short term purchase intentions, instead the outlay is considered necessary for the maintenance of buyer-seller relationships (Luo & Kumar, 2013). Informed by the aforementioned information we suggest, that higher levels of export intensity will play an important enhancement role in the relationship between EBGoCP and their potential export performance outcomes. Accordingly we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 5. Export Intensity positively moderates the relationship between EBGoCP and export (a) market performance (b) financial performance.

4.4.3. Scope of Exporting

A firm's scope of exporting or 'export spread' provides a good indication about a firm's choice of market expansion and geographic diversification strategies in term of regional versus global (Beleska-Spasova et al., 2012). IB and marketing scholars define a firm's scope of exporting as the number of active export markets (Cavusgil, Zou, & Naidu, 1993; Hultman, Katsikeas, & Robson, 2011). "Experience in multiple markets helps firms learn and solve internationalization-process-issues, building a procedural knowledge base for internationalization" (Kotler, Manrai, Lascu, & Manrai, 2019, p. 487). Further, the experience of previous channel governance consequences can inform and advance exporters knowledge in making future channel governance decisions (Li et al., 2017). Therefore, we argue that as an exporter's scope expands, they will benefit from their earlier EBGoCP experiences in different overseas markets. These incremental foreign market EBGoCP experiences will lead to exporters with a widening scope of markets selecting or avoiding previous EBGoCP mechanisms and this will lead to improved export performance outcomes. On this basis, we hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6. Scope of exporting positively moderates the relationship between EBGoCP and export (a) market performance (b) financial performance.

5. Method

5.1. Sample and data collection procedures

To test the hypotheses of this study, we obtained data using a survey from UK exporters. Specifically, the sample frame consisted of recent recipients of the Queens Award for International Trade. This is a well-established UK government accolade in recognition of successful UK exporters overseas trade efforts. A multi-industry sample was utilized in order to enhance generalizability, (Murray, Gao, & Kotabe, 2011) consisting of firms' exporting either/or both goods and services. For global branding there are two approaches which can be taken; first, a branded house approach where a single master brand is used and, secondly; a house of brands approach which instead entails using an array of product brands (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2004). Within the B2B domain focus is placed on one brand and branding is at the corporate firm level (Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011). Appropriately, we used the unit of analysis at the firm level and utilized key informants within the participating firms which is an accepted approach within export performance studies (e.g., Zeriti, Robson, Spyropoulou, & Leonidou, 2014). The informants were knowledgeable about their firms exporting and brand governance activities and therefore qualified to complete the survey. Each firm was pre-screened using publicly available information about the sample frame, firms operating within a B2C capacity were excepted from participation since the focus of this study is within the B2B domain. There was also a filter question within the survey which asked respondents to confirm if they operate within the B2B or B2C domain. At this stage, the identity and contact details of key informants was also confirmed, in many cases this required calling the firm for verification. This led to the identification of 632 managers who would be the first point of contact. Many agreed in principle to participate and either met the knowledgeability criteria or agreed to enlist other members of their firm with the specialist knowledge required to assist with the completion of particular sections (e.g., Rindfleisch & Antia, 2012). A pre-notification was also sent by post to each key informant which provided further details about the study and the offer of a summary of the findings to encourage their participation. The useable responses numbered 208 (79 incomplete surveys with missing values were removed), providing a response rate of 33%.

To mitigate concerns about using subjective performance measures collected from the participant firms we also correlated the export performance data against objective performance measures. For instance, in order to qualify for winning a Queens Award, each firm had to prove they had made above £100,000 in sales overseas in their first year of entry and shown year-on-year growth. In addition, each firm demonstrated outstanding growth in overseas earnings relative to their business size and sector. Further, the firms had provided pertinent documentation to confirm the achievement of steep year-on-year growth (without dips) in overseas sales over three years and/or considerable annual growth (without dips) over a six year period. Lastly, we utilized secondary data to cross validate the firm characteristic moderator variables in the analysis. Communicating with the Queens Awards office and using information contained within their press books served as the primary source to gather secondary data. A high degree of correspondence between secondary data and our survey responses were found, supporting the accuracy and authenticity of the survey responses.

Table 1 provides the profile of the 208 firms which constitute the sample. All of the participant firms are privately owned and based in the UK. As displayed in Table 1, firms represented a range of sizes, this was reflected by both their turnover and number of employees. Most firms exported to more than 10 markets and demonstrated high levels of experience, 92% had more than 5 years exporting experience.

5.2. Measure development

In developing the measures to indicate our focal construct 'export brand governance of channel partners' and the contingent environmental factors, we synthesized a wide range of perspectives from the IB and marketing literatures. We went through a process of refinement for the new multi-item focal construct informed by pre-testing of the entire questionnaire with international marketing and survey design experts from both academia and industry. In the following sections we describe how each of the constructs was operationalized and expand on the development of the focal construct. With the exception of firm size, scope of exporting and export intensity, all constructs and variables in the study were operationalized using a multi-item format (seven-point Likert scale). The full list of items used to measure each construct is presented in the findings Table 2. In most cases we used multiple item measure to ensure adequate construct reliability, convergent reliability and content validity. However, we did also activate single item measures for two firm characteristics (export intensity and scope of exporting). This practice accepted when "a single measure may validly capture a construct without too much random noise" (Hulland, Baumgartner, & Smith, 2018, p. 100).

The theoretical foundations which underpin relational governance convey that solidarity, information exchange and flexibility are three relational norms which represent key norms of obligation and cooperation (Svendsen & Haugland, 2011). With reference to our earlier definition of EBGoCP, the survey instrument should entail the important components: initiating, maintaining and monitoring the ongoing brand relationship with export channel partners. With this in mind we developed the measures of the focal construct to comprise of these relational

Table 1
Profile of the Survey Participants.

Items	Presence	Items	Presence	Items	Presence
■ *Number of Employees*		■ *Number of Years Exporting*		■ *% Turnover from Exports*	
1–10	10%	1–5	8%	0–25	13%
11–50	41%	6–10	23%	26–50	17%
51–250	35%	11–25	40%	51–75	23%
251–500	6%	26–50	22%	76–100	47%
more than 500	8%	more than 50	7%		
■ *Annual Turnover*		■ *Number of Export Markets*		■ *Goods / Services*	
0–500,000	0%	1–10	21%	Goods	49%
501,000–1,000,000	3%	11–25	28%	Services	21%
1,000,001–5,000,000	33%	26–50	23%	Goods & Services	30%
5,000,001–10,000,000	22%	51–100	17%		
10,000,001–25,000,000	19%	more than 100	11%		
25,000,001–50,000,000	12%				
Above 50 million	11%				

Table 2
Construct, items and factor loadings.

	Constructs and items	Factor loadings
Export Brand Governance of Channel Partners (EBGoCP)		
1	Our company builds strong brand relationships with export channel partners	0.797
2	Our company provides export channel partners with training on our brand meaning and values	0.693
3	Our company regularly checks that export channel partners are adequately conveying our brand meaning and our brand values are being upheld	0.730
4	Our company requests ongoing feedback from export channel partners on our international branding programs	0.616
Foreign Market Competitiveness		
1	Competition in this export market is cut-throat	0.725
2	There are many "promotion" wars in this export market	0.868
3	Price competition is the hallmark of this export market	–
4	One hears of a new competitive move in this export market almost every day	0.713
Country of Origin Image (COI)		
1	People from the UK are proud to achieve high standards	0.693
2	People from the UK are known as being hardworking	0.639
3	The UK has a raised standard of living	0.879
4	The UK has a well-educated workforce	0.769
5	UK companies have high technical skills	0.755
Scope of Exporting		
–	Number of export markets	0.636
Export Intensity		
–	Export sales as a percentage of total sales revenue	0.927
Firm Size		
1	Number of employees	0.854
2	Annual Turnover	0.891
Export Market Performance		
1	Market share growth	0.861
2	Growth in sales revenue	0.902
3	Acquiring new customers	0.780
4	Increasing sales to existing customers	0.929
Export Financial Performance		
1	Export profitability	0.945
2	Return on Investment (ROI)	0.877
3	Export margins	0.823
4	Reaching export financial goals	0.822

norms specifically relating to brand governance. Our focal construct EBGoCP, is measured from the exporters perspective in our survey. We followed the reasoning outlined by (Grewal, Saini, Kumar, Dwyer, & Dahlstrom, 2018) to advance our new focal construct EBGoCP. This involves the application of two important principles; relevance and augmentation. Applicable to the context of our study, relevance indicates that a pre-existing construct is apropos to the EBGoCP; however, has never been used in relation to EBGoCP issues previously. Further, augmentation pertains to alternations which include "introducing new dimensions, attributes, or nuances that extend pre-existing constructs" (Grewal et al., 2018, p. 59) in order to complete and improve extant theory.

Therefore, we developed a four item scale to capture EBGoCP in this research setting by adapting previously used relevant relational governance/foreign channel partner measures and other related branding measures (e.g., Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Kaleka, 2002; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Claro et al., 2003; Morgan, Vorhies, & Schlegelmilch, 2006; Fang, Palmatier, & Grewal, 2011). Previous measures tap managers' assessments of the firm's relationships with channel partners, the majority of which are relative to competitors. Examples of specific items include the construct 'support to foreign distributor/subsidiary' which consisted of the three measures "overall support to foreign distributor/subsidiary", "training provided to sales force of foreign distributor/subsidiary" and "promotion support to foreign distributor/subsidiary" (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994). Further measures include "developing and maintaining close supplier relationships" and "identification of attractive sources of supply" (Kaleka, 2002) which had been used to investigate the effects of suppliers' relationship development on the achievement of cost advantage positioning in export markets. The measures "channel relationships in this export market" and "duration of relationships with our current distributors in this market" (Morgan et al., 2006) had previously been used in a construct named 'relational resources' to examine resource-performance relationships in B2B markets. Our construct was also informed by the eight item 'relational governance' construct used by Claro et al., (2003). Additionally we referred to Fang et al., (2011) measures of relationships with channel members; "our firm has established relationships with very diverse channel members" and "our firm has established strong relationships with our existing channel members". A further consideration for our focal construct is the concept of feedback from export channel partners on international branding programs. The ability to collect stakeholder feedback (both internal and external) informs the corporate strategy decision making process which is vital to ensuring the ongoing relevancy of the brand (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002).

We adapted these general relational governance items to the specific context of an exporters brand governance and subjected them to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using varimax rotation, which resulted in our four-item construct: 1. Our company builds strong brand relationships with export channel partners, 2. Our company provides export channel partners with training on our brand meaning and values, 3. Our company regularly checks that export channel partners are adequately conveying our brand meaning and our brand values are being upheld, 4. Our company requests ongoing feedback from export channel partners on our international branding programs. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each of these statements when using export channel partners.

Following notable IB studies such as Cui, Griffith, Cavusgil, and Dabic (2006), we captured foreign market competitiveness using the items originally recommended by Jaworski and Kohli (1993). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements for each of the four items. For the operationalization of COI, this was measured using an adapted version of the scale used previously in a B2B context by Chen *et al.* (2011). The same items can also be found within La et al. (2009) IB client perspective B2B study which was based originally on a scale used by Parameswaran and Pisharodi (1994). This construct assesses the importance of certain factors as being a benefit of being a UK based firm, compared with their main overseas competitors. In particular, that people from the UK are known for being well educated, hard-working, achieving high standards, have a raised standard of living, and have high technical skills. For the firm characteristics and export performance constructs we collected both subjective and objective data, using the survey responses and verifying results against objective information held by the Queens Awards Office about these firms. We measured firm size using the number of full-time employees and turnover, EFA of the full model (varimax rotation) displayed a strong correlation between these two variables. We captured scope of exporting as the natural logarithm of the firm's current number of active export markets (Cavusgil et al., 1993; Hultman et al., 2011). We evaluated export performance relative to major competitors (within the firms most important export markets) using the two constructs and scales from Morgan, Katsikeas, and Vorhies (2012); specifically export market and financial performance.

To control for firm heterogeneity effects on our dependent variables we included a number of control variables that are regarded as important by the export literature. Specifically, we include exporting experience using the logarithmic transformation of the number of years the firm had been exporting (Gnizy et al., 2017). Given, that the nature of goods and services are different when considering export performance research (Chen et al., 2016) we also control for whether firms are exporting goods/services. Our next control variable is management experience which we measured via the logarithmic transformation of the number of years of exporting experience of the management. Existing research suggests management export experience is positively linked to exporting activities and export performance (Love, Roper, & Zhou, 2016). It has been established that a multitude of management factors are important to exporting success (Chen et al., 2016); therefore, we also controlled for the manager's role in firm. Each of the measures and their validation statistics are reported in Table 2.

6. Data analysis and findings

6.1. Bias assessments

We evaluated the threat presented by two main types of biases; non-response bias and common method bias (CMB). Consistent with previous exporting studies (e.g., Gnizy et al., 2017), non-response bias was assessed by comparing early and late responding firms with respect to various firm characteristics, including number of years exporting, number of employees, annual turnover and goods or services. A series of three waves was used to represent each time a reminder email was sent to complete the questionnaire. The findings reflected no significant differences at the 5% level between early responding firms (first wave of the survey) and later respondents (second and third wave of the survey) which suggests that non-response bias is not likely to influence the results of our study (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

We used recommended ex ante procedural approaches to limit the threat of CMB (e.g., Chang, Van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010). As detailed in our methods section, we verified some of the information provided for our dependant variables and moderator variables against a different source to the responses received via our survey. Following established guidelines (e.g., Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan, & Moorman, 2008) we attempted to involve multiple respondents from within the participant firms to complete the survey. We encouraged key respondents to enlist the support of other respondents in their firms who had superior knowledge of particular areas of their business. There was adequate evidence from the responses and communications that many firms followed this approach. For instance one firm asked if the survey could be broken into sections for multiple departments to complete. On a number of occasions the key respondent emailed to say the survey was complete and cc'd the additional respondents within the firm who took part. Participants were assured there were no right or wrong answers, their participation would be confidential and their firm would be unnamed and unidentifiable within the results. In addition to articulating the questions in simple, unambiguous way, we arranged questions under broad headings unconnected to their constructs.

To further rule out CMB we ran two post hoc statistical tests. Harman's one factor test was conducted in confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and the factor extracted represented less than a third of the variance, so well under the majority, indicating no bias. Mindful of the claim that the Harman test is insensitive (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), we also used a more sophisticated statistical test which involves the direct measure of a common latent factor (CLF) conducted using CFA (Rindfleisch & Antia, 2012). We used the analytical procedures established by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to create and evaluate a CLF. All items were loaded onto a CLF, in addition to loading onto their respective constructs. Following this, we made an assessment of the structural parameters significance when the CLF was included, and then went through the process again without the CLF present. By comparing the standardized regression weights estimates (with and without the presence of the CLF) we could determine that there were no significant differences. Accordingly, common method adjusted estimates were not required for our structural model. (Podsakoff et al., 2003),

Finally, there are many contingent relationships examined in our model which are difficult-to-visualize interactions, non-direct effects (e.g., the moderators). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that participants would not be able to form a perceptual picture of the model and the relationships being examined (Chang et al., 2010). Given these factors, we conclude that CMB is unlikely be an issue within our study.

6.2. Reliability and validity

We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for all items simultaneously using AMOS 25 statistical software and applied the maximum likelihood estimation procedure. Within the model each item was restricted to load on its hypothesized factor while allowing the underlying latent factors to correlate. There was a requirement for the removal of one item due to low factor loading – item three of the construct foreign market competitiveness. All items then demonstrated satisfactory loadings on their expected constructs indicating convergent validity (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). For the single item measures within the model, the conservative assumption of an error of 0.1 was used (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Table 2 displays the constructs, the items and each individual factor loading. Also presented in Table 2 are the key fit indicators of the measurement model, we used the conventional chi-square test along with other key fit heuristics to assess model fit. All were within the recommended thresholds suggesting a good fit with the data; (χ^2 [d.f.] = 336.783 [170], $p < 0.000$), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.978, Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) = 0.964, Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 0.978, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.029 and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA] = 0.043.

We used the formula recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981) to calculate average variance extracted (AVE). All constructs were satisfactory (>0.5), indicating a good level of convergent validity (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). The square root of AVE for each construct was greater than the correlation between the constructs; therefore demonstrating that the criterion for discriminant validity has been met. For the construct reliability (CR), we used the λ calculation

Table 3
Correlation matrix and measurement statistics.

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD
1. Export Brand Governance of Channel Partners	**0.712**								4.803	1.500
2. Foreign Market Competitiveness	0.160	**0.771**							2.404	1.020
3. Country of Origin Image	0.127	0.182	**0.752**						4.147	7.990
4. Export Market Performance	0.130	0.113	0.281	**0.870**					5.053	1.025
5. Export Financial Performance	0.234	0.109	0.339	0.826	**0.868**				5.198	1.073
6. Size of Firm	0.054	-0.015	-0.092	0.034	-0.009	**0.873**			3.566	1.266
7. Export Intensity (a)	0.064	0.149	0.047	0.236	0.198	-0.156			2.847	1.000
8. Export Scope (a)	0.299	0.114	0.042	0.171	0.100	0.407	0.240		3.490	1.301
Number of items	4	3	5	4	4	2	1	1		
Composite Reliability	0.803	0.706	0.865	0.925	0.924	0.865	–	–		
Average Variance Extracted	0.507	0.595	0.565	0.757	0.754	0.762	–	–		

(Note: The figures corresponding to square root of AVE for each column construct is captured in bold along the diagonal.
Other figures beneath the bold figures are the correlation between the constructs)
(a) Single item measure
$\chi 2$ (d.f.) = 336.783 (170), CFI = 0.978, IFI = 0.978, NNFI = 0.964, SRMR = 0.029 and RMSEA = 0.043.

Table 4
Results.

Hypothesis	Result	Independent variables		Dependant variables	Coefficient (t-value) [*p*-value]
		Direct effects			
H1(a)	Supported ✓	Export Brand Governance of Channel Partners (EBGoCP)	→	Market Performance	0.041 (6.073) [0.000]
H1(b)	Supported ✓	Export Brand Governance of Channel Partners (EBGoCP)	→	Financial Performance	0.139 (20.599) [0.000]
		Direct links of moderators			
		Foreign Market Competitiveness (FMKTCOMP)	→	Market Performance	-0.036 (−5.452) [0.000]
		Foreign Market Competitiveness (FMKTCOMP)	→	Financial Performance	-0.044 (−6.662) [0.000]
		Country of Origin Image (COI)	→	Market Performance	0.268 (40.783) [0.000]
		Country of Origin Image (COI)	→	Financial Performance	0.323 (49.035) [0.000]
		Size of Firm (SIZE)	→	Market Performance	0.184 (23.184) [0.000]
		Size of Firm (SIZE)	→	Financial Performance	0.069 (8.663) [0.000]
		Export Intensity (ExINTENSITY)	→	Market Performance	0.303 (41.565) [0.000]
		Export Intensity (ExINTENSITY)	→	Financial Performance	0.233 (31.978) [0.000]
		Export Scope (ExSCOPE)	→	Market Performance	0.093 (13.546) [0.000]
		Export Scope (ExSCOPE)	→	Financial Performance	0.021 (3.020) [0.003]
		Interaction Effects			
H2(a)	Not Supported	EBGoCP x FMCOMP	→	Market Performance	-0.033 (−5.045) [0.000]
H2(b)	Not Supported	EBGoCP x FMCOMP	→	Financial Performance	-0.004 (−0.591) [0.555]
H3(a)	Supported ✓	EBGoCP x COI	→	Market Performance	0.048 (7.356) [0.000]
H3(b)	Supported ✓	EBGoCP x COI	→	Financial Performance	0.053 (8.115) [0.000]
H4(a)	Supported ✓	EBGoCP x SIZE	→	Market Performance	0.050 (6.796) [0.000]
H4(b)	Supported ✓	EBGoCP x SIZE	→	Financial Performance	0.088 (12.004) [0.000]
H5(a)	Not Supported	EBGoCP x ExINTENSITY	→	Market Performance	-0.015 (−2.190) [0.029]
H5(b)	Not Supported	EBGoCP x ExINTENSITY	→	Financial Performance	-0.025 (−3.747) [0.000]
H6(a)	Supported ✓	EBGoCP x ExSCOPE	→	Market Performance	0.055 (7.793) [0.000]
H6(b)	Supported ✓	EBGoCP x ExSCOPE	→	Financial Performance	0.039 (5.530) [0.000]
		Controls			
		Export Experience	→	Market Performance	-0.257(−32.555) [0.000]
		Export Experience	→	Financial Performance	-0.144(−18.282) [0.000]
		Management Experience	→	Market Performance	0.056 (8.299) [0.000]
		Management Experience	→	Financial Performance	0.069 (10.283) [0.000]
		Role in Firm	→	Market Performance	0.089 (13.397) [0.000]
		Role in Firm	→	Financial Performance	0.092 (13.880) [0.000]
		Goods/Services	→	Market Performance	0.059 (9.012) [0.000]
		Goods/Services	→	Financial Performance	0.026 (4.004) [0.000]

p value in squared brackets. significant at $p < 0.05$.
$\chi 2 = 59.912$ with df = 27, CFI = 0.999, IFI = 0.999, NNFI = 0.992, SRMR = 0.007 and RMSEA = 0.014

advocated by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Each CR was sufficiently large (>0.7) and therefore exhibited a suitable level of construct reliability. The correlation matrix in Table 3 provides evidence to show that no validity issues were found.

6.3. Endogeneity

Endogeneity has become a growing area of interest within the IB literature; therefore, we will provide a succinct discussion on why we do not believe there is an issue with regards to our study. Potential concerns surrounding endogeneity include simultaneity, measurement errors, common-method variance and omitted variables/selections (c.f. Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2014; Ullah, Akhtar, & Zaefarian, 2018). First and of foremost importance when considering endogeneity, it is vital to address the role of theory since statistical techniques have become a substitute for critically thinking about the problem of interest and this is resulting in questionable analyses leading to deceptive results and unsuitable implications for policy (Thomas, Cuervo-Cazurra, & Brannen, 2011; Reeb, Sakakibara, & Mahmood, 2012). Where there is the prospect of endogeneity in a model, statistical tools can provide indirect tests that may provide researchers with useful information to guide their decisions (Ketokivi & McIntosh, 2017); however, “there is no way to statistically ensure that an endogeneity problem has been resolved” (Roberts & Whited, 2013, p. 498). This can be attributed to the fact that various key relevant exogenous variables of interest in a given model are omitted and not measured, and that exogenous variables are possibly never likely to be precisely exogenous; therefore, addressing potential sources of endogeneity is a matter of judgment (Ketokivi & McIntosh, 2017).

Statisticians suggest that the endogenous nature of variables can be determined by previous literature (e.g., Hair et al., 2014) which has theoretically defined the nature of the variables in question. The bedrock of the IB perspective is “If performance is the dependant variable, the true independent variables are FSAs” (Rugman & Oh, 2011, p. 204). Therefore, where export performance is the dependant variable and brand related FSAs are included, then these FSAs should be used as the true independent variables determining performance outcomes. In addition, pertinent to our research model, prior B2B studies have answered the core question of whether relational governance has a performance effect with a resounding yes (e.g., Claro et al., 2003).

Based on the aforementioned scholarly views, the path is from EBGoCP to export performance, not vice versa. Appropriately, within our model, we have therefore conceptually set out EBGoCP as the independent variable and export performance as the dependant variable. Consequently we are confident that simultaneity (c.f. Antonakis et al., 2014) is not an issue in our research. With regards to measurement errors, as previously detailed, for our sample we attempted to collect data from multiple informants which minimized potential measurement errors (Wang, Li, & Chang, 2016). Further, in relation to common-method variance, we have addressed potential concerns within our section covering CMB. Lastly, by choosing to include a number of relevant control variables we attempted to reduce the potential issue of omitted variables within our model (c.f. Stock, Zacharias, & Schnellbaecher, 2017).

6.4. Findings

The advanced multivariate technique structural equation modeling (SEM), is recommended as a sophisticated approach for export channel research when studying indirect moderator effects (Li *et al.* 2017). “Structural equation modeling represents a melding of factor analysis and path analysis into one comprehensive statistical methodology” (Kaplan, 2009, p. 3). We used AMOS 25 to conduct moderated SEM to test our hypothesized relationships. Prior to calculating the interaction terms, we mean centered the raw scores of the predictor variables in order to reduce multicollinearity issues associated with the addition of interaction terms in the model (Aiken and West, 1991; Hayes, 2018). Importantly, this protocol does not affect the raw regression coefficient for the interaction term (Iacobucci, Schneider, Popovich, & Bakamitsos, 2017). In order to conduct our analysis, we generated composites of the multi-item variables which represent an interaction term. Each variable was standardized preceding analysis and used to create multiplicative interaction terms. The next step was to estimate direct antecedent structural paths from each of the moderating variables and their corresponding interaction term to the dependent performance variables. The results suggest the model has satisfactory explanatory power, with R-square values of 0.200 recorded for export market performance and 0.201 for export financial performance. All the results from our interaction modeling are presented in Table 4, including the standardized coefficient estimates, t values, significance levels and fit indices.

With regard to our first hypotheses, the results show a significant positive effect from EBGoCP on both export market performance H1(a) ($\beta = 0.041$, $t = 6.073$, $P < 0.000$) and export financial performance H1 (b) ($\beta = 0.139$, $t = 20.599$, $P < 0.000$). In relation to the hypothesized moderating relationships, the interaction between EBGoCP and foreign market competitiveness is significant and negative for export market performance H2(a) ($\beta = -0.033$, $t = -5.045$, $P < 0.000$) and non-significant and negative for H2(b) ($\beta = -0.004$, $t = -0.591$, $P = 0.555$); therefore H2(a) and (H2(b) are rejected. Graphs of these interactions are shown in Figs. 2 and 3. As expected support is established for H3(a) linking the positive interaction of EBGoCP and COI with enhanced export market performance ($\beta = 0.048$, $t = 7.356$, $P < 0.000$). Relatedly, we find a significant positive interaction effect of EBGoCP and COI on export financial performance H3(b) ($\beta = 0.053$, $t = 8.115$, $P < 0.000$). Graphs of these interactions are presented in Figs. 4 and 5. Moving on to look at the interaction effects of export firm characteristics and EBGoCP on export performance, we discovered some mixed findings and not all support our hypotheses. To begin with, we find a significant positive interaction of firm size on the positive link between EBGoCP and; export market performance (H4a) ($\beta = 0.050$, $t = 6.796$, $P < 0.000$) and export financial performance H4(b) ($\beta = 0.088$, $t = 12.004$, $P < 0.000$). Graphs which illustrate these interactions are shown in Figs. 6 and 7. The results did not indicate support for enhanced export performance resulting from an exporter’s EBGoCP being contingent upon higher levels of export intensity. Consequently, against expectations we find a significant negative effect H5(a) ($\beta = -0.015$, $t = -2.190$, $P = 0.029$), H5(b) ($\beta = -0.025$, $t = -3.747$, $P < 0.000$). Graphs of the interactions of the unsupported H5(a) and H5 (b) are presented in Figs. 8 and 9. As predicted, the results did lend support to both H6(a) and H6(b) which indicates there is a significant positive interaction between EBGoCP and the scope of a firm’s exporting activities on both export market performance H6(a) ($\beta = 0.055$, $t = 7.793$, $P < 0.000$) and export financial performance ($\beta = 0.039$, $t = 5.530$, $P < 0.000$). Figs. 10 and 11 provide graphs to illustrate these interactions.

7. Discussion and implications

Despite more than five decades of theorizing and empirical studies, a complete picture of why some firms can perform better than others in export markets is yet to be formed. In this study of export performance, we duly focused on the important inter-related subjects of governance and branding, which as an intangible FSA has received a paucity of attention from IB scholars. Given that indirect marketing using intermediary channel partners makes it difficult to enhance the typicality of an exporter’s brand (e.g. Pegan et al., 2020), this underscores the importance of our timely research in this unchartered territory. In addition to hypothesizing the presence of contingent effects and reporting the results in Table 4, we adopt a well-documented approach and probe the findings with inferential tests (c.f. Hayes, 2018). Following established procedures (Aiken & West, 1991) we provide a clear visual representation of the results by plotting the contingent

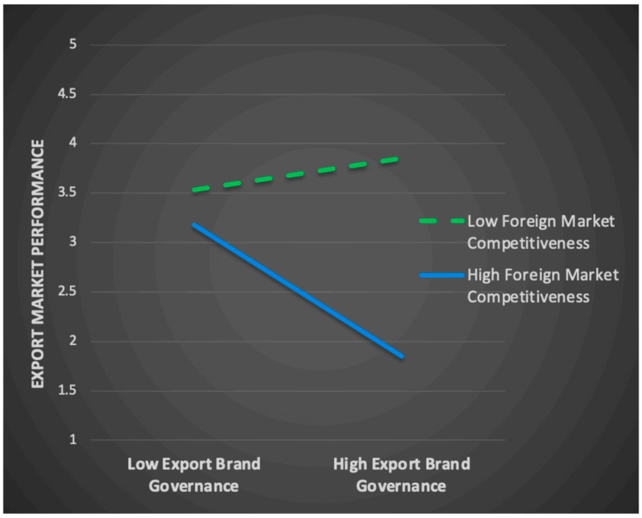

Fig. 2. The contingent effect of foreign market competitiveness on the EBGoCP-export market performance link.

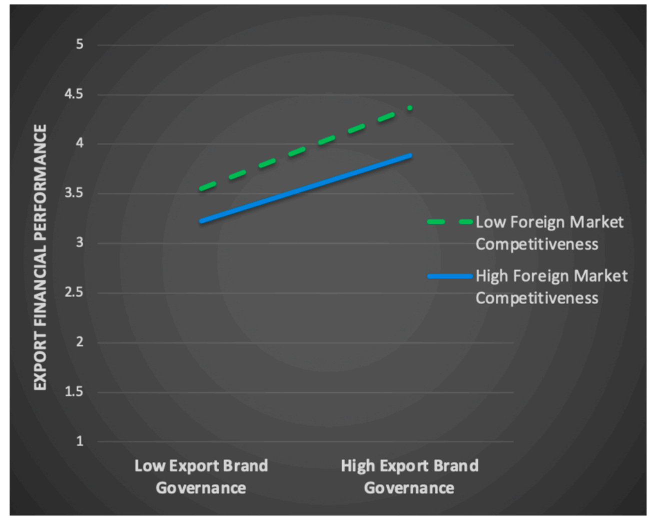

Fig. 3. The contingent effect of foreign market competitiveness on the EBGoCP-export financial performance link.

effects (Hayes, 2018). Specifically, for each of our contingency Hypotheses (2–6) the slope of the regression line of EBGoCP on export performance will be positive (negative) for high (low) of each of the moderators. The graphical analysis from each hypothesized moderator are displayed within our discussions.

To begin, we consider the direct link between EBGoCP and export performance, consistent with our expectations the results elucidated that there is a positive link between EBGoCP and export performance (market and financial). This finds agreement with the relational channel governance perspective that a strong channel relationships can enhance firm performance (e.g., Dong, David, & Cavusgil, 2008) and indicates that relational norms play a central role in governing interfirm channel interactions (Zhang, Cavusgil, & Roath, 2003). We found support for the assertion that relational governance mechanisms are effective for knowledge based assets, in the form of branding (Hoetker & Mellewigt, 2009). It becomes progressively more difficult to organize and optimize interdependencies between businesses as coordination requirements rise, subsequently this has implications for performance (Strange & Humphrey, 2019). We have demonstrated that a central influential factor when considering export performance is the coordination efforts involving EBGoCP.

First, a surprising finding is the negative moderating effect of foreign market competitiveness on the relationship observed between EBGoCP and export performance. The contingent effect of foreign market competitiveness on the path between EBGoCP and export market performance is significant but negative. Fig. 2 clearly provides a visualization of this unpredicted effect. This suggests that the greater the levels of foreign market competition, the more negative the effect of EBGoCP on exporters' ability to achieve growth in sales and market share, or the ability to acquire new customers or increase sales to existent buyers. Therefore, along with the non-significant moderating effect of EBGoCP on export financial performance (Fig. 3), the results do not support our expectations. Subsequently, we overestimated the prospective success from the exploitation of branding as an FSA (Rugman & Verbeke, 2008), the successful governance of branding did not have the potential to increase export performance in markets which had higher levels of competitiveness. We assess an explanation for this could be due to structural market imperfections (Dunning & Rugman, 1985).

Our results as displayed in Figs. 4 and 5, explicitly show that EBGoCP relates positively to export performance when COI is high rather than

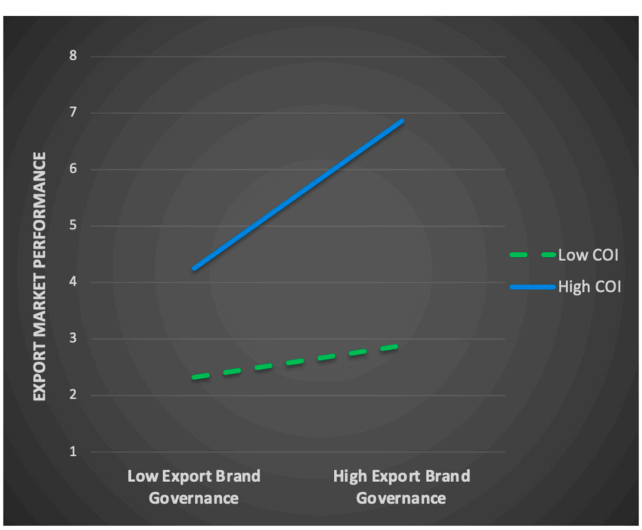

Fig. 4. The contingent effect of COI on the EBGoCP-export market performance link.

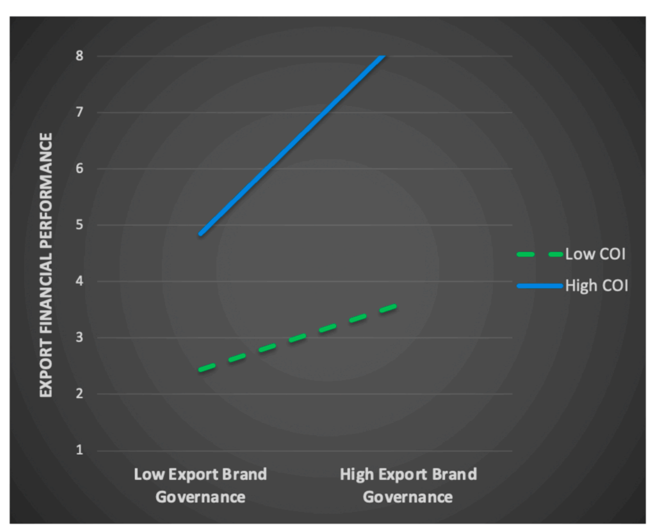

Fig. 5. The contingent effect of COI on the EBGoCP-export financial performance link.

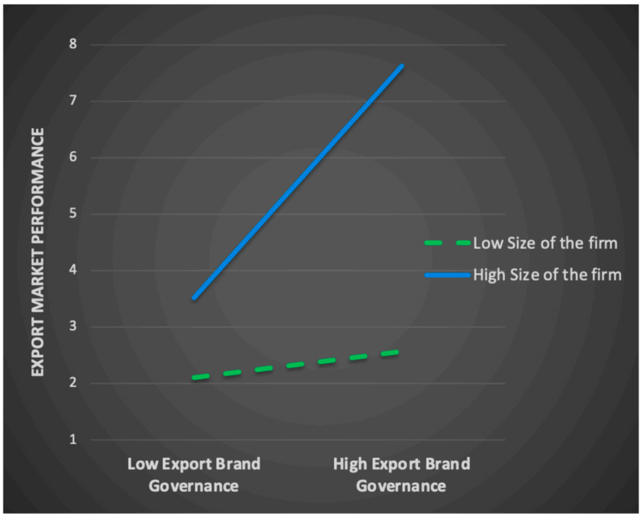

Fig. 6. The contingent effect of the size of the firm on the EBGoCP-export market performance link.

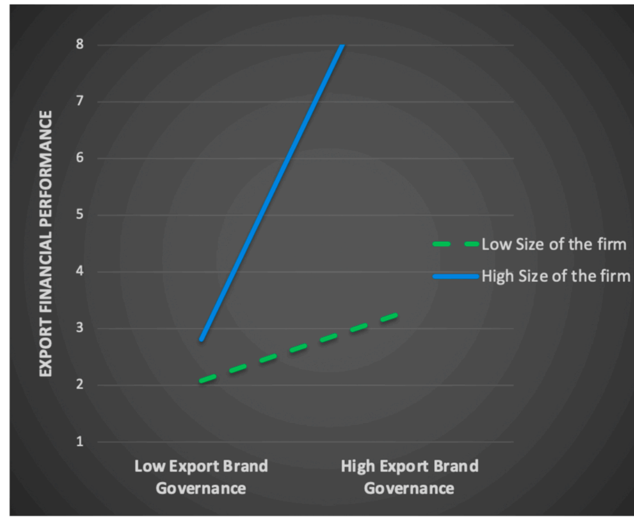

Fig. 7. The contingent effect of the size of the firm on the EBGoCP-export financial performance link.

low. This significant finding is broadly in line with global branding work examining cultural stereotypes which has suggested that a brand's country of origin can play an important role (c.f. Chabowski et al., 2013). Our findings indicate that if the brand governance mechanisms are being implemented by a firm from a country with higher levels of COI then the channel partner will be more engaged and responsive to the commitment required. If channel partners perceive the image of the exporting country and people behind the brand as being strong, (achieve higher standards, more hardworking, better standard of living, well-educated and possessing better technical skills) then the brand is more likely to yield profitable returns from their own invested resources. It is generally held that more favorable evaluations of products is likely to happen when consumers' perceive a country's strengths match up with the skills or settings required to produce the products (e.g., Roth & Romeo, 1992). We distinguish from prior studies by demonstrating that export channel partners will also positively relate key positive cues stemming from the image of the exporting firms country, with their brand. Therefore, COI increases such factors as trust, commitment and cooperation which are central to effective relational governance (Palmatier et al., 2007). Overall, under conditions where COI is higher, export channel partners believe it is more in their own best interests to engage in mutually complementary 'relationship strengthening' (Li & Ng, 2002). Subsequently, this leads to export performance gains.

As hypothesized, firm size has a significant moderating effect on the link between EBGoCP and export market/financial performance. This was in line with expectations since in comparison with smaller firms, larger firms tend to internationalize at a faster rate and to a greater degree (Krammer et al., 2018). Previously longitudinal research has found a positive link between firm size and export performance (Majocchi et al., 2005). Although the direct effects of our moderators on export performance are not a focus of this study, Table 4 shows that our results also validate this direct effect. It is an accepted practice for IB studies to use the number of employees as a proxy for firm size; however, the different nature of exporters' business and differing levels of involvement of channel partners may alter staff requirements and therefore lead to misleading comparisons. As a consequence, to bolster the robustness of our findings, we used both number of employees and annual turnover to measure the size of our participant firms. This can give future studies which build upon these results confidence in their comparative findings.

We had also been interested in testing the contingent effect of export intensity on the link between EBGoCP on export performance. Contrary to our theorized predictions, we found higher levels of export intensity

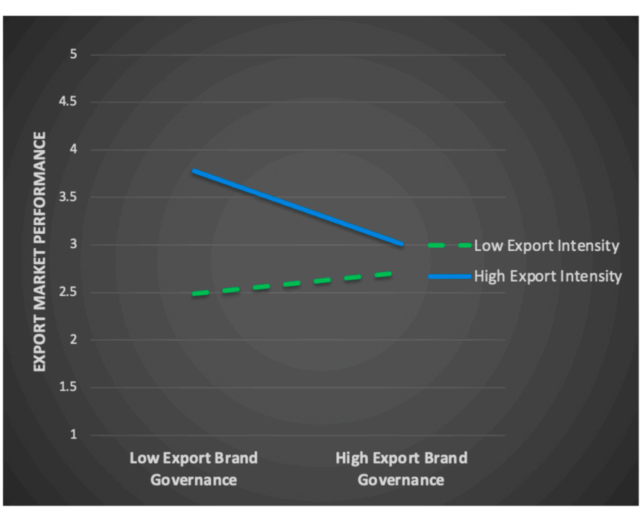

Fig. 8. The contingent effect of export intensity on the EBGoCP-export market performance link.

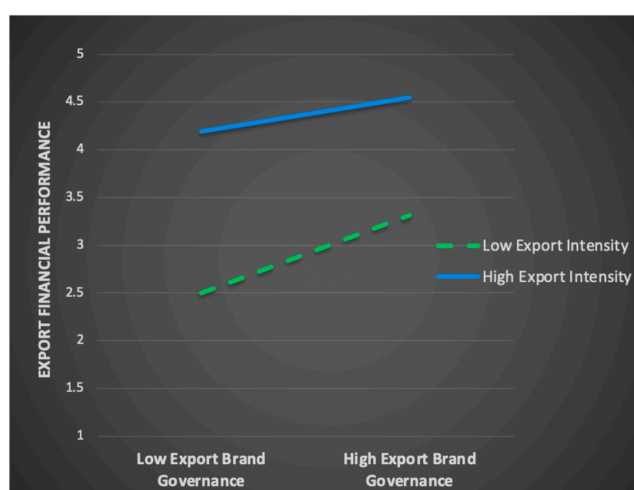

Fig. 9. The contingent effect of export intensity on the EBGoCP-export financial performance link.

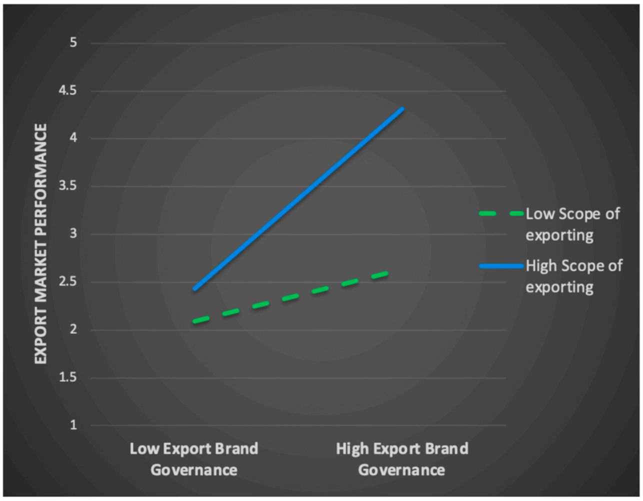

Fig. 10. The contingent effect of scope of exporting on the EBGoCP-export market performance link.

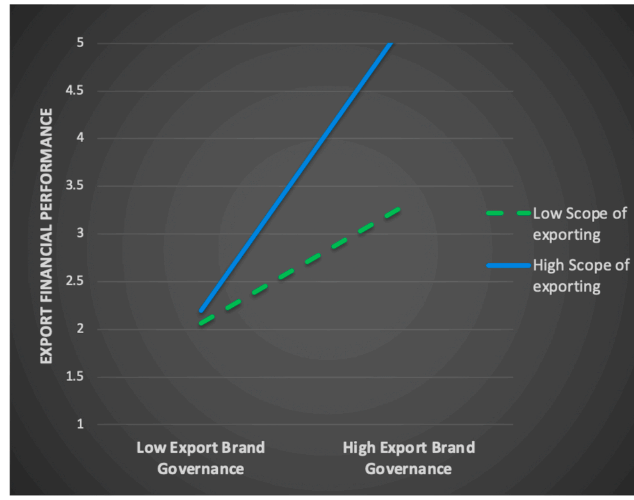

Fig. 11. The contingent effect of scope of exporting on the EBGoCP-export financial performance link.

does not translate to a stronger link. Surprisingly, a slight negative effect was found and this negative moderating effect was significant for the EBGoCP-export performance links (shown in Table 4). An analysis of the slopes in Fig. 8 clearly shows a negative linear relationship, where higher levels of export intensity means the effect of EBGoCP on export market performance declines. Fig. 9 presents a slightly different picture; however, the slopes represent a negative moderating effect from higher levels of export intensity which will lead to a negative interaction under high levels of EBGoCP. Low export intensity is associated with weaker commitment to export markets (Boehe & Jiménez, 2016). Therefore, we would suggest that an implication of our unforeseen findings is that it is far more challenging for exporters to provide effective governance for their brand as they become more involved and increase their degree of commitment to foreign markets. This could be a stumbling block for brands to overcome which deserves further investigation. Based on the entirety of our findings, it would appear that an initiative to offset the negative contingency effect associated with higher levels of export intensity, exporters should duly focus on synchronously increasing the size of their firm and the scope of their export activities.

In accordance with our expectations, a higher scope of exporting positively moderates the EBGoCP-export performance link. Figs. 10 and 11 provide clear illustrations of these results. Interestingly, these results do not align with our findings for export intensity. Our findings are consistent with the view that as firms possess more export experience (through widening their scope of markets), they become more familiar with information channels which leads to an increase in the effectiveness of their exporting activities (e.g., İpek & Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2019). Therefore, our empirical results build upon the channel-governance-experience views expressed by Li et al. (2017), by indicating that an accumulation of exporters knowledge and brand governance experience through entering more overseas markets, positively enhances their EBGoCP-export performance pay-offs.

7.1. Theoretical Implications

The intersection of relational governance, branding and export channel partners is an important emergent area of research but one which had lacked a unifying theoretical model. There are a number of important implications for scholars which stem from our work. First, our practical new definition of EBGoCP, development of a conceptual framework and empirical assessment of key constructs has provided robust foundations from which we hope more scholars are inspired to build upon this vital domain of study. Historically, IB research has not fully taken account of the theoretical implications of intangible assets and specifically brand related benefits to international trade. Therefore, there are "blank pages" to be filled and this provides a wide scope to conduct pertinent important research. Secondly, a significant implication from our research is that there is a need for more targeted study into the governance of export channel partners. "Research into intermediate governance modes has significant implications for strategic management as it explores critical choices relating to the scope of the firm and to firm boundaries" (Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995, p. 373). Yet, it is clear from five decades of exporting literature that in most cases, studies on the subject of export performance ignore the role of intermediary channel partners. Retrospectively, this seems foolhardy considering that almost every exporter will use channel partners at least at some stage. Further, to emphasize this point it is worth noting a fact known since the time of the first export focused studies; "the end objective of organizations involved in an inter-organizational relationship is the attainment of goals that are unachievable by organizations independently" (Van de Ven, 1976, p. 25).

Third, we answer recent calls by IB scholars (Li et al., 2017) to advance the theoretical scope of export channel research by addressing the lack of moderating factors being used in this critical area. Our study enriches contingency theory by testing the moderating effects of both external and internal firm contextual contingencies on the link between EBGoCP and export performance. This intersects with the adoption of relational governance theory (c.f. Sheng et al., 2011), which we use to assess our main direct effects; consequently, we contribute to existing literature on how these distinctive theoretical approaches can be used effectively together within the same conceptual framework. Regarding this, our findings suggest that certain contingencies; foreign market competitiveness and export intensity do not positively moderate the EBGoCP-export performance link. This concurs with the theoretical findings of other relational governance studies which have addressed factors which limit the effectiveness of governance mechanisms. For instance, it has been demonstrated that the cultural environment can modify the influence of relational governance (e.g., Griffith & Myers, 2005). Fourthly, in terms of domain specific implications, B2B selling is relationship orientated (Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson, & Pullins, 2020). Therefore, we extend scholarly understanding on B2B relationships which are characterized by long-term trust based relationships (Zhang et al., 2014; Dotzel & Shankar, 2019) by looking at the cross border context and providing the first empirical study of EBGoCP. As such we contribute to domain specific exporting knowledge, since in contrast to relational governance mechanisms, formal governance mechanisms are not reliant on past interactions; therefore, indicating the acute suitability of EBGoCP in the B2B domain. Lastly, we contribute to the field by specifically detailing the limits of our study, and opportunities for fresh novel directions scholars can take to deepen our collective knowledge going forward.

7.2. Managerial implications

The fact that relationships are important to business is not something scholars can really lay claim as a contribution to industry, since arguably this is something managers (especially in the B2B domain) have intuitively known for a very long time. However, the question of how these relationships should be governed across borders with regards to intangible assets such as branding is a substantially different prospect, and to which managers do not have all the answers. Subsequently, a knowledge gap has existed. Successful exporters' inherent branding knowledge is not shared and therefore managers of firms looking to initiate or improve upon their exporting activities have had no guidelines to follow. Our findings provide valuable information to managers tasked with governing their brands through channel partners, and shows that investments in these relationships pays off.

We have shown managers that if they duly focus on EBGoCP then the valorization of their brand in overseas markets will be more effective. For managers of international brands, looking for ways to improve their channel relationships our findings show the effectiveness of EBGoCP by setting branding standards can reduce conflicts between firms and their external channel partners (Sharma & Parida, 2018). We have demonstrated that the country image of a brand's origin can strongly influence brand attitudes (e.g., Magnusson et al., 2011) for B2B export channel partners. Managers should therefore recognize the moderating effect of COI on their EBGoCP with regards to performance outcomes and use this tacit knowledge to accentuate or downplay their COI depending on where they originate from (i.e., favorable or unfavorable COI associations). The unexpected findings in relation to the competitiveness of foreign markets may provide new insights for managers in understanding the important role that levels of competitiveness in their export markets may play in disabling their EBGoCP efforts. As relayed within our discussion section, when considering EBGoCP, we would recommend managers consider simultaneously expanding the scope of their exporting and/or the size of their firm when planning to increase their export intensity. Although this may add to the complexity of their strategy, our findings show if they exclusively increase export intensity then this will negatively moderate the positive effects of their hard worked for EBGoCP efforts on export performance.

Given our findings, we would caution managers against reducing the scope of their exporting activities unless this is completely unavoidable. Even if there is for example a drastic shift in exchange rates to a certain market, new undesirable legislation passed or flourishing domestic market opportunities, we would recommend to managers that it is better to reduce the intensity of their exporting activities instead of removing their presence in foreign markets entirely. As domestic and overseas markets conditions evolve and once again become more attractive, these exporters will be well placed to not only expand the scope of their exporting but also to consolidate and build upon existing brand focused relationships with their channel partners.

7.3. Limitations and future research directions

While providing original insights into the relationship between EBGoCP and export performance, consonant with other scholarly work, this study has its limitations. We acknowledge these and how they can provide fruitful avenues for future studies. Relational mechanisms which are created on the basis of co-operation and dependent on agreed social-exchange norms function within dyadic inter-firm relationships (Wathne & Heide, 2004). Therefore, given that we have conducted this study only from the exporting seller's perspective, we would advocate that future research also includes the views of channel partners. Furthermore, "the B2B customer journey is social by definition, with the actors, their roles, and their relationships changing across the journey as it is co-created" (Grewal & Sridhar, 2021, p. 102). Thus, to offer a complete picture we would also suggest augmenting the resulting dyadic framework with views from the ultimate B2B buyers. In addition, we did not distinguish between indirect/direct channel classifications for our empirical study. While this allowed for expedient generalizations across different classifications of channel partners, we would advocate future research endeavors could probe deeper and compare findings from indirect (domestic) channel partners and direct (overseas based) channel partners. Further, it would be interesting to contrast the findings from direct export channel partners located in different regions of the world.

Our study was conducted using successful exporters based in the UK. Therefore, future research should also consider less effective exporters or exporters with success but that have recently experienced a drop in their exporting performance. Further, given that developed countries generally have better COI than developing countries who face more challenges such as an unfavorable image and lower international attention, we would especially encourage studies which replicate our work using the COI moderator from a developing country perspective. Longitudinal insights would also be of benefit, for instance future work could assess the effects of exporter brand governance mechanisms implemented at one point in time, on the performance outcomes 18–24 months later. Recent IB research has drawn attention to the fact that optimal decisions made in relation to cross border governance should also consider the organization's capabilities (Narula, Asmussen, Chi, & Kundu, 2019). Therefore, we suggest future studies should also include an exporter's antecedent organizational capabilities within their conceptualizations and test the link between these capabilities and EBGoCP.

Our unexpected results could have a wider reach than just branding focused EBGoCP. Therefore, we also suggest extended relational governance models should also examine the contingent effects of foreign market competitiveness and export intensity on the relational governance-export performance relationship in different settings to see if the negative moderating effects similarly stand. Finally, a rise in digital platforms is reshaping the dynamics of how exporters facilitate international sales through their channel partners. "One of the main digital disruptions many brands face is the changing nature of intermediation–often even resulting in disintermediation–allowing manufacturers to switch or eliminate intermediaries whose added costs may exceed the value they provide" (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 367). There are already digital platforms in the B2B domain which act as electronic intermediaries enabling exporters to identify new market and buyer opportunities. A recent IB study has progressed understanding of cyber transaction governance by examining "the role of globalized digital platforms in firm internationalization in our modern world" (Deng, Liesch, & Wang, 2021, p. 22). Therefore, we would also recommend that future work should incorporate the role of digital platforms within the EBGoCP framework.

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