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Dynamic capabilities behind performance of exporting firms: Taxonomy, critique, future research directions☆

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviews how specific categories of dynamic capabilities (DCs) relate to performance in exporting research. Our sample comprises 53 studies from 50 articles published until the end of 2024, where DCs were examined as predictors of a performance construct in an exporting context. We classify DCs into an established taxonomy based on hierarchical nature (higher, intermediate, lower) and organizational unit of analysis (individual, group, organizational, inter-organizational). Additionally, we synthesize how these DC categories connect to performance in terms of direction, significance, content of financial metrics, measurement level, and directness. The results indicate that exporting firms' performance is mostly hypothesized to be driven by higher-order DCs at the organizational level, with a clear pattern of positive effects of DCs on performance, as measured using both financial and non-financial indicators. Our results further reveal that export-task-specific DCs at the lower-order remain unexplored, while intermediate-order DCs focus heavily on marketing and DCs at individual and group levels are neglected. Moreover, the DC-performance link has mostly been tested directly, with limited involvement of mediators or moderators. We conclude by outlining future research directions that address the gaps and problematic issues identified in the review.

1. Introduction

A growing body of literature, both in the domestic and international contexts, hypothesizes and tests the effect of dynamic capabilities (DCs) on organizational performance (see recent review studies by Fainshmidt, Pezeshkan, Lance Frazier, Nair, & Markowski, 2016; Karna, Richter, & Riesenkampff, 2016; Scheuer & Thaler, 2023). Mostly, if not always, empirical studies on the subject expect a positive influence of DCs on performance based on the following argumentation. First, DCs enable organizations to respond to dynamic market conditions by adapting, integrating, and reconfiguring internal and external resources in a way to ensure their alignment with the environment (Fang & Zou, 2009; Wang & Ahmed, 2007; Zollo & Winter, 2002). Second, DCs drive innovation and foster long-term growth by facilitating the development of new products, processes, and operational configurations, which collectively contribute to competitive advantages even in relatively stable environments (Helfat et al., 2007; Karna et al., 2016; Teece, 2014a, 2014b). Third, DCs amplify organizational learning and knowledge transfer, which accelerates firms' ability to adapt to environmental changes while minimizing the costs and risks associated with such adaptations (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003; Schilke, 2014b; Zott, 2003). Fourth, DCs improve evolutionary fitness by enabling firms to strategically renew their resource base and align their processes with changing market conditions, which supports both short-term efficiency and long-term survival in competitive environments (Barrales-Molina, Martínez-López, & Gázquez-Abad, 2014; Helfat et al., 2007; Pitelis, Teece, & Yang, 2024). These postulations particularly matter in international business settings, where the rapid expansion of trade, advancements in technology, and intensified global competition necessitate that firms continually adapt their capabilities (Kalaignanam, Tuli, Kushwaha, Lee, & Gal, 2021; Leonidou & Hultman, 2019; Samiee & Chabowski, 2012). DCs in that sense enable firms to innovate and strategically realign resources to sustain competitive advantages in dynamic and volatile global markets (Schoemaker, Heaton, & Teece, 2018; Tan & Sousa, 2015; Teece, 2012).

The nature of the influence of DCs on organizational performance has stimulated a considerable number of systematic review studies (e.g., Bitencourt, de Oliveira Santini, Ladeira, Santos, & Teixeira, 2020; Karna

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et al., 2016), which is expected, given the fact that organizational performance is the most frequently examined immediate outcome of DCs (Kurtmollaiev, 2020). Recent systematic review studies (e.g., Dayangan & Aykol, 2024) indicate that DCs examined in international marketing research are no exception, with exporting being the most prominent context where the effect of DCs on performance has been tested. Surprisingly, the way in which DCs predict performance within the exporting field has been reviewed only through a meta-analysis by Tan and Sousa (2015), which focused on marketing DCs and financial and non-financial export performance. On the other hand, Jie, Harms, Groen, and Jones (2023) categorized both substantive and dynamic capabilities influencing early internationalizing firms' performance, but did not explicitly examine DCs in the exporting context. However, the literature on DCs within the exporting research reveals that DCs are not only set predictors of export performance but also of international market performance (e.g., Asseraf, Lages, & Shoham, 2019; Falahat, Knight, & Alon, 2018; Jean, Sinkovics, Kim, & Lew, 2015), innovation performance (e.g., Colclough, Moen, Hovd, & Chan, 2019; Weerawardena, Mort, Salunke, Knight, & Liesch, 2015), or firm survival (e.g., Freixanet & Renart, 2020). Furthermore, performance implications of DCs in exporting research remain inconsistently measured, which leads to mixed and inconclusive findings (Mandler, Sezen, Chen, & Özsomer, 2021; Obadia & Vida, 2024). As such, performance is measured at different levels, such as export venture and business, by using financial and non-financial metrics, while the extant literature reports positive, negative and non-significant effects of DCs on performance. Finally, while some studies hypothesize a direct effect of DCs on performance (e.g., Hughes, Hodgkinson, Arshad, Hughes, & Leone, 2019), others hypothesize that DCs should affect performance through an explanatory mechanism (e.g., Gregory, Ngo, & Karavdic, 2019) and/or through the interaction of DCs with another construct (e.g., Mitręga, 2023). This fragmented nature of the way DCs affect performance in exporting research needs consolidation.

Recent systematic literature reviews on DCs – performance relationship acknowledge the relevance of hierarchical order (e.g., Fainshmidt et al., 2016) and organizational unit of analysis of DCs (e.g., Scheuer & Thaler, 2023) for organizational performance. However, how different categories of DCs are linked to performance in exporting research has not been synthesized. While Brock and Hitt (2024) synthesize DCs of international firms at two hierarchical orders, their analysis neither connects DCs to performance nor references the organizational unit. However, exporting is primarily an international business-to-business marketing and sales activity (Albaum, Albaum, & Duerr, 2008), which depends on various organizational and inter-organizational processes, structures, and routines and requires leveraging capabilities of individuals (e.g., employees, managers, entrepreneurs) and entities (e.g., product development teams) both within (i.e., exporting firm) and outside (e.g., in relationship with network partners) the organization to succeed and contribute to the company's performance (Friedman, Carmeli, & Tishler, 2016; Kim, Cavusgil, & Cavusgil, 2013; Nyamrunda & Freeman, 2021; Schilke, Hu, & Helfat, 2018). Besides, exporting success may rely on DCs ranging from a more knowledge-based nature (e.g., relational learning) to more task-specific ones (e.g., marketing execution) (e.g., Lorenzoni & Lipparini, 1999; Zucchella, Strange, & Mascherpa, 2019).

We position our study at the intersection of three clusters of systematic reviews on DCs – those centering on (1) DCs in international business research (Figueiredo, Ferreira, & Vrontis, 2024; Xu & Abdullah, 2025), (2) DCs – performance relationship (e.g., Bitencourt et al., 2020; Karna et al., 2016), and (3) DCs across different hierarchical orders and/or organizational unit of analysis (e.g., Leemann & Kanbach, 2022; Weiss & Kanbach, 2022) (see Fig. 1). The objective of this study is to systematically review the connection between specific categories of DCs and performance in exporting research. Specifically, we aim to supply answers for the following research questions: (1) What do we know about how DCs at different hierarchical orders and organizational units of analysis predict the performance of exporting firms? (2) What are the problematic issues and gaps in the pertinent literature with respect to categories of DCs examined, the nature of performance tested, and the relationship between these two?, and (3) How can future research address these problematic issues and fill the gaps to advance knowledge in the field?

In meeting these objectives, we intend to make two contributions to the literature. First, we categorize DCs scattered in the exporting research based on their hierarchical nature and organizational unit of analysis. This classification enables a fine-grained analysis by

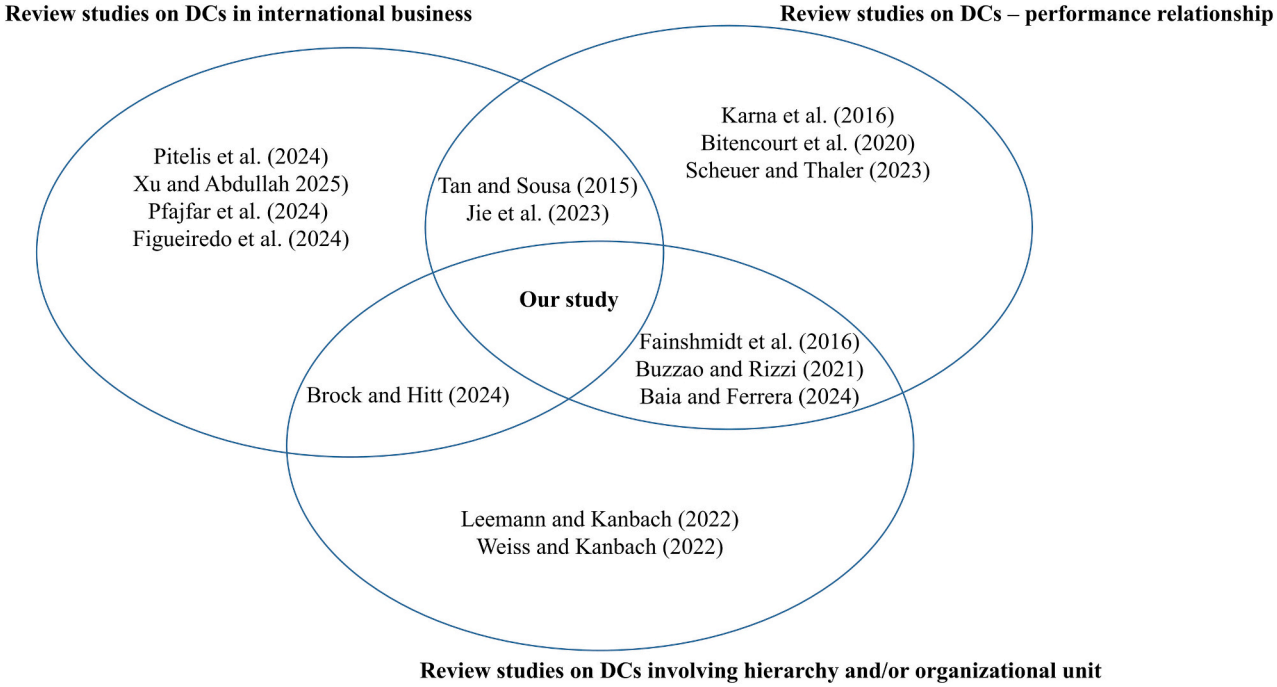

Fig. 1. Positioning of this review in dynamic capabilities research.

recognizing that DCs are not uniform constructs (Brock & Hitt, 2024; Scheuer & Thaler, 2023), revealing both recurring and irregular patterns in the examination of DCs as predictors of performance in the pertinent literature, which in turn opens avenues for fruitful future research. Furthermore, we acknowledge exporting as a multifaceted business activity that depends on multiple business functions, structures, and processes executed by individuals, teams, organizations, and interorganizational partners. As such, our study evaluates the extent to which DCs related to specific hierarchical orders and organizational units have been covered in the exporting literature as predictors of performance.

Second, we provide a systematic mapping of how specific categories of DCs are linked to specific types of performance in terms of sign, significance, metrics content, level of assessment, and directness of the effect. This endeavor not only results in a detailed and organized picture of how performance is measured as an outcome of DCs in exporting research but also points to prevailing patterns and underrepresented areas. In doing so, our analysis delivers an updated organization of the relationship between DCs and performance within the exporting context and a detailed evaluation of how the effect of DCs on performance constructs unfolds. This contribution paves the way for promising future research directions in improving the conceptualization of DCs effect on performance.

The rest of the study is organized as follows. First, we provide background information on the nature of DCs, as well as the way they are categorized and explain performance. Second, we explain our systematic literature review methodology in terms of search strategy, article evaluation and selection, and data extraction, analysis, and synthesis. Third, we present the findings of the review. Fourth, we critically discuss the study's findings for each reviewed aspect of the literature, featuring problematic issues and gaps, providing theoretical and managerial implications, and indicating how future research could address the identified problematic issues and fill the gaps. Finally, we discuss study limitations and conclude the paper.

2. Theoretical background

The dynamic capabilities view (DCV) intends to provide an explanation for how firms could sustain competitive advantage in dynamic and rapidly evolving markets (Teece, 2007). The theory posits that DCs improve firm performance in that they integrate, build, and reconfigure competencies that address change (Teece, 2007; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). DCs have been conceptualized as structured processes that transform resources into novel strategies (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000), mechanisms that refine operational routines and modify existing capabilities (Winter, 2003; Zollo & Winter, 2002), and deliberate actions that reshape a firm's resource base to sustain competitiveness by sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring opportunities (Helfat et al., 2007; Teece, 2007). Within this framework, it is important to distinguish DCs from ordinary capabilities. Ordinary capabilities involve the performing of ongoing administrative, operational, and governance-related functions that maintain the status quo and support “doing things right” (Teece, 2014a; Winter, 2003). They underpin technical fitness, whereas DCs support evolutionary fitness by enabling firms to “do the right things at the right time” through the identification and enactment of strategic change (Helfat & Winter, 2011; Pitelis et al., 2024). DCV emphasizes continuous renewal of capabilities and resource configurations, which drives strategic transformation rather than merely ensuring operational efficiency (Teece, 2007, 2012; Zollo & Winter, 2002). DCs' effectiveness becomes most evident in volatile environments, where they enable firms to navigate uncertainty and adapt more effectively than ordinary capabilities (Karna et al., 2016; Schilke et al., 2018).

The concept of DCs is largely structured around three core components: sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring (Teece, 2007). Sensing refers to the identification of market opportunities and threats through environmental scanning, market intelligence, and technological foresight (Schoemaker et al., 2018; Verbeke, 2022). Seizing enables firms to capitalize on identified opportunities by allocating resources effectively, developing new products, services, and business models that align with market needs (Eriksson, 2014; Teece, 2007). Finally, reconfiguring entails continuous renewal and transformation of the firm's resource base, which allows firms to maintain their competitive position amid evolving industry conditions (Augier & Teece, 2008). Thus, DCs equip firms with the ability to navigate dynamic market conditions as they adapt to shifting demands, integrate resources effectively, and reconfigure capabilities to withstand competitive pressures (Fang & Zou, 2009; Teece et al., 1997; Wang & Ahmed, 2007; Zollo & Winter, 2002). In this process, DCs facilitate the decision-making process by ensuring that firms act in a timely manner while aligning with shifting market demands and innovatively adapting their resource base (Barreto, 2010; Pitelis et al., 2024; Schilke, 2014b; Teece, 2014a). Moreover, DCs foster innovation and long-term growth as firms develop new products, redesign processes, and adjust operational structures to maintain a competitive advantage, even in relatively stable market conditions (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Helfat et al., 2007; Karna et al., 2016; Teece, 2014b). Such a systematic transformation of the resource base is expected to yield substantial performance implications, as firms remain ever vigilant for adaptation and continuously sharpen their capabilities to gain confidence and thrive in harmony with their evolving environment (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003; Zott, 2003).

Although sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring provide a structured way to conceptualize DCs, research points to a considerable variation in how DCs operate across different hierarchical orders, organizational levels, and strategic contexts (Brock & Hitt, 2024; Fainshmidt et al., 2016; Scheuer & Thaler, 2023; Schilke, 2014a). As such, the nature of DCs varies across levels based on their complexity and dynamism. For example, more complex and abstract DCs are classified as higher-order, while those that are more specific and task-specific are referred to as lower-order (Fainshmidt et al., 2016; Schilke, 2014a; Winter, 2003). Moreover, DCs do not operate in isolation but are shaped by managerial agency, organizational structures, and inter-organizational dynamics (Pitelis et al., 2024). Some DCs reside at the individual level, embedded in managerial cognition and entrepreneurial decision-making, whereas others emerge at the organizational level, orchestrating firm-wide strategic responses and resource reconfigurations (Helfat & Martin, 2015; Wilden, Devinney, & Dowling, 2016). Beyond the firm, inter-organizational and network-level DCs influence how firms form alliances, integrate with external stakeholders, and leverage institutional frameworks (Schilke et al., 2018; Schulze & Brusoni, 2022).

This multilevel variation in DCs has fueled an ongoing debate regarding how DCs drive firm performance. While some scholars assert that DCs directly enhance firm performance by improving adaptation and strategic renewal (Teece, 2014a), others argue that their effect is indirect, working through intermediate outcomes such as innovation, learning, and resource reconfiguration, which ultimately shape performance (Helfat & Peteraf, 2009; Laaksonen & Peltoniemi, 2018). The interplay between different DC levels further complicates this relationship, as firm-wide adaptation often depends on individual managerial decisions, inter-organizational collaborations, and external market conditions (Schilke et al., 2018).

One business setting where the multilevel nature of DCs becomes particularly critical is exporting. Specifically, exporting represents a key internationalization strategy for firms seeking to expand their market reach and leverage competitive advantages in foreign markets (Leonidou & Hultman, 2019). However, as global trade expands, technological advancements accelerate, and competition intensifies, firms must continuously refine their capabilities to remain competitive in foreign markets (Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Samiee & Chabowski, 2012). These challenges amplify environmental uncertainty, institutional complexity, and cross-border operational hurdles, which make a strong DCs base essential for exporters to navigate volatility and sustain long-term success (Teece, 2012). DCs play a crucial role in enabling

exporters to navigate these challenges by fostering adaptability, enhancing decision-making agility, and facilitating knowledge transfer across markets (Fang & Zou, 2009; Tan & Sousa, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1. Review boundaries and research questions

Following Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003), this study adopts a systematic literature review approach, which involves clearly defined research questions, a rigorous search and selection strategy, and a thorough analysis and synthesis of the content of selected articles. In alignment with our study objective of conducting a systematic review of the connection between specific categories of DCs and performance in exporting research, we formulated the following research question: What do we know about how DCs at different hierarchical orders and organizational units of analysis predict performance of exporting firms? Supplying an answer for this broad research question required us to set the following research sub-questions: (1) What are the hierarchical orders of DCs identified as predictors of performance in exporting research? (2) To which organizational units of analysis do performance-predicting DCs pertain in exporting research? (3) To which types of performance are DCs at specific hierarchical orders and organizational units of analysis linked, in terms of the financial content of metrics and measurement levels, and (4) What is the nature of the effect of DCs at specific hierarchical orders and organizational units on performance in terms of statistical significance, direction, and directness?

3.2. Search strategy formulation and eligibility criteria

Next, we formulated our search strategy. We conducted an electronic search of articles using the search strings '"dynamic capabilities' AND 'exporting' OR 'international marketing' OR 'international business'" within abstract, title, and keywords in the Web of Science and Scopus databases, which are frequently used in systematic literature reviews due to their comprehensive coverage of social sciences literature (e.g. Christofi, 2024; Palmaccio, Dicuonzo, & Belyaeva, 2021). We restricted the document type to article, language to English, and subject area to business, management and accounting. This study was not time-bound, and its scope covered all relevant articles published by the end of 2024 in business, management, and marketing journals. Thereafter, we identified 613 articles; however, eliminating duplicate records led us to 481 articles.

Eligible studies for the review had to be published in 2-, 3-, 4-, or 4*-level journals according to the 2024 Academic Journal Guide of the Chartered Association of Business Schools, in line with prior systematic reviews that applied similar quality thresholds to balance breadth with methodological rigor (e.g., Marinković, Al-Tabbaa, Khan, & Wu, 2022; Palmié, Aebersold, Oghazi, Pashkevich, & Gassmann, 2024; Saebi, Foss, & Linder, 2019). In line with the scope and objectives of our review, we further screened articles in order to make sure that they (1) have an empirical nature with at least one construct explicitly labelled as DC and hypothesized and tested for its effect on performance,[1] (2) inform readers clearly about operationalization of DC and performance constructs, (3) test the effect of DCs on performance within the context of exporting, and (4) provide sufficient information about the results of the tested effect of DCs on performance.[2] In applying criteria (1) and (2), we followed the originating authors' conceptualization and operationalization of the focal capability, consistent with prior DCV reviews (e.g., Laaksonen & Peltoniemi, 2018; Pitelis et al., 2024; Schilke et al., 2018). We did not independently reclassify whether these capabilities were, in fact, dynamic or ordinary, as no universally accepted framework exists for this distinction and the boundary is often blurred in practice (Pitelis, 2022; Schilke & Helfat, 2025). These eligibility checks left us with 39 articles, which were supplemented by another eleven articles identified after a manual check of reference sections of two recent review studies on DCs (Kahiya & Warwood, 2022; Pezeshkan, Fainshmidt, Nair, Frazier, & Markowski, 2016). The final sample to be systematically reviewed consisted of 53 studies across 50 articles. The top three publication outlets for these articles were *International Marketing Review* (16%), *Journal of Business Research* (12%), and *International Business Review* (10%) (see Appendix A for the distribution of articles to journals). The process of searching, evaluating and selecting articles is illustrated in Fig. 2.

3.3. Data extraction, analysis and synthesis

For data extraction, we first employed a systematic, structured approach, focusing on the hierarchical order and organizational unit levels of DCs in exporting research. In order to assign performance-predicting DCs to their hierarchical order and organizational unit levels, we relied on the taxonomy created by Morgan and Slotegraaf (2012) to classify business-to-business marketing capabilities. The latter taxonomy was deemed suitable for the purposes of our review for three reasons. First, exporting by and large is an international business-to-business marketing activity in that it involves processes such as (1) developing and adapting offerings in cooperation and close contact with the foreign customer, distributor or agents (Sima, Chung, & Liu, 2024), (2) setting prices to the importer (Obadia, Bello, & Gilliland, 2015), (3) designing and managing distribution channels from the exporter's home market to the target foreign country (Sraha, Sharma, Crick, & Crick, 2020), (4) engaging mainly in personal communication with foreign customers through visits or trade show attendance, as well as providing promotional support to foreign customers (Obadia & Vida, 2024), and (5) creating value together with a substantial number of network members in the foreign target markets such as importer, agent, freight

[1] In line with our aim to synthesize tested DC–performance relationships, we restricted inclusion to studies that operationalized at least one construct explicitly labelled as a DC and quantitatively tested its effect on performance. Qualitative-only studies were therefore excluded from our coding; however, we tracked qualitative evidence during screening to inform our discussion and future-research agenda.

[2] Our scope was not limited to studies that labelled their outcome as 'export performance'; rather, we included all empirical studies in which DCs were hypothesized and tested in relation to exporting firm performance. At the same time, we excluded studies whose primary setting was other internationalization strategies (e.g., foreign direct investment, global strategy) because such studies rarely isolate exporting as a distinct outcome. Our keyword search ('dynamic capabilities' AND 'exporting' OR 'international marketing' OR 'international business') was deliberately broad to capture any potentially relevant work. We then carefully screened full texts and retained all studies whose core focus was exporting or where a DC-performance link within the exporting context could be clearly identified.

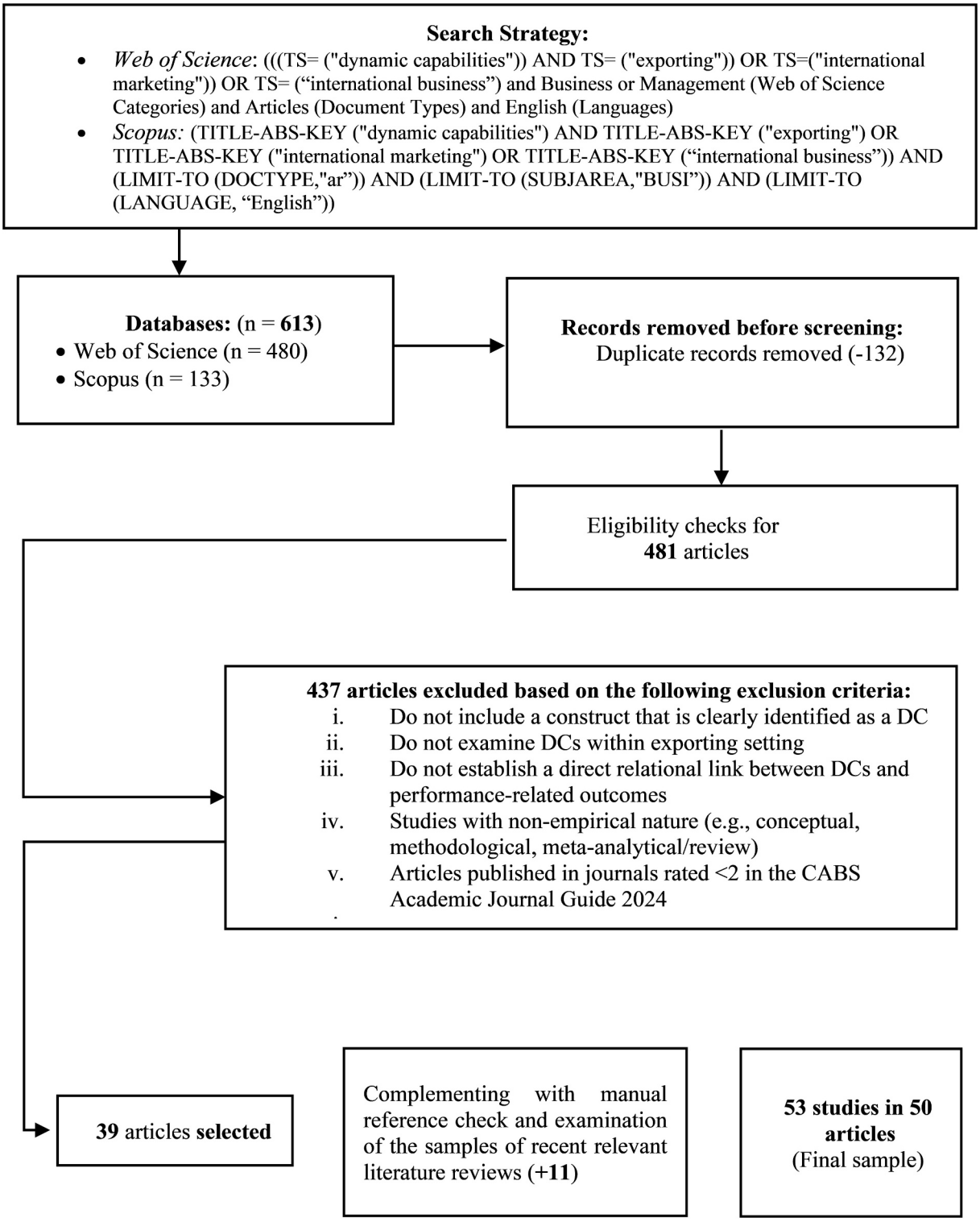

Fig. 2. Flowchart of search and selection process.

forwarders, logistics firms, and insurance companies (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018). Second, the taxonomy recognizes that DCs are hierarchical in nature, ranging from specialized task DCs to higher-order learning DCs, and DCs can evolve, develop, and can be conceptualized at different levels of organizational unit of analysis (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). Third, while other taxonomies exist, such as Schilke's (2014a) distinction between first- and second-order DCs, which emphasizes regenerative "learning-to-learn" capabilities, and Jie et al.'s (2023) categorization by transaction locus (internal vs. external) and strategic function (exploration vs. exploitation), these frameworks offer either higher-level or function-specific distinctions. Recent research similarly stresses the relevance of taxonomies that capture both hierarchical order (lower, intermediate, higher) and organizational units (individual, group, organizational, inter-organizational), given that exporting processes unfold across individual, group, firm, and inter-organizational layers (Morgan, Feng, & Whitler, 2018; Pfajfar, Mitręga, & Shoham,

2024). Morgan and Slotegraaf's taxonomy incorporates these two dimensions simultaneously, which makes it analytically precise and context-sensitive for reviewing how DCs contribute to performance in exporting research.

According to this taxonomy, DCs were designated hierarchically into lower-order, intermediate, and higher-order capabilities. Lower-order DCs focus on task-specific exporting activities, intermediate DCs are those that mark processes that integrate several specialized capabilities, and higher-order DCs represent learning-based processes that enable firms to adapt, innovate, and transform across markets. In terms of their organizational units, DCs are classified based on the level at which they are developed and executed, that is, individual, group, organizational, and inter-organizational. Individual-level DCs involve personal expertise and skill development, while group-level DCs focus on team-based efforts. Organizational-level DCs encompass firm-wide coordination and strategy execution, and inter-organizational DCs span firm boundaries to leverage partnerships and collaborations with external entities (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). To clarify the locus of these DCs in exporting organizations, we further anchor each level in examples of how they typically manifest in practice. In line with DCV, which emphasizes that higher-level capabilities rest on microfoundations at lower levels (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015; Teece, 2007), individual cognition and skills feed into group routines, which in turn support organizational orchestration and inter-firm collaboration. Based on this backdrop, at the individual level, lower-order DCs may involve export sales managers or boundary spanners applying specialized skills in sensing opportunities or managing customer interactions, while higher-order DCs at this level can be seen in managers' learning and opportunity recognition behaviors. Group-level DCs often consist of project-based or departmental teams (e.g., marketing, logistics, R&D) that coordinate resources to carry out adaptation or product development tasks for export markets. These typically correspond to intermediate-order DCs but can also scale into higher-order learning processes within teams. Organizational-level DCs encompass firm-wide routines, but their form differs by organizational type. For instance, in SMEs, they often cover the entire firm because exporting is integrated into broad routines, whereas in MNEs, they might be concentrated in specialized international business units; here, intermediate- and higher-order DCs are most visible, facilitating cross-functional coordination and strategic renewal. Finally, inter-organizational DCs cut across firm boundaries, such as capabilities developed jointly with distributors, logistics providers, or export consortia; these can range from lower-order coordination to higher-order collaborative learning and innovation DCs.

In addition to classifying DCs, our analysis captured their relationship with performance outcomes. Performance-related data were extracted by taking into consideration four aspects of performance constructs in exporting research: sign and statistical significance of the effect of DCs on performance, composition of the performance construct by financial vs. non-financial metrics, measurement level of the performance, and directness of the effect of DCs on performance. Accordingly, DCs' effect on performance could be positive, negative, or statistically-not-significant. Following Brax, Calabrese, Levialdi Ghiron, Tiburzi, and Grönroos (2021), Liu, Tsui, and Kianto (2021), and Tan and Sousa (2015), performance was classified as financial (i.e., measured through metrics such as profitability, revenue, and sales growth), non-financial (i.e., assessed through customer satisfaction, brand reputation, market positioning, and retention), and both financial and non-financial indicators (i.e., combining financial metrics with non-financial indicators). With respect to its measurement level, performance was assessed as being gauged at the firm level (i.e., focusing on total exports and firm-specific advantages) and export venture level (i.e., addressing the performance of single products or product lines in specific foreign markets) (Katsikeas, Leonidou, & Morgan, 2000; Sousa, Martínez-López, & Coelho, 2008). Additionally, to strengthen the robustness of our DC-performance analysis, we conducted a supplementary coding of performance objectives (sales, profitability, market share, strategic) and frames of reference (own plan, competition, market), the details and results of which are reported in Appendix B. Finally, DCs could affect performance directly, indirectly through a mediating construct, and/or in interaction with a moderating construct.

First, two independent researchers under the guidance of the lead researcher designated performance-driving DCs in the sample articles to their relevant hierarchical order and organizational unit level by using Excel sheets. Then, they entered for each DC the nature of the construct of performance the former predicted, feeding in whether the performance construct was measured in financial, non-financial, or both financial and non-financial terms, as well as whether performance was assessed at the firm or export venture level. In addition, they coded the specific performance objectives (sales-related, profit-related, market share-related, or strategic) and the frame of reference applied (own plan, competition, or market) in line with established classifications. They also recorded whether DC's predicted performance directly, or there was a mediating or moderating construct between DCs and performance. Finally, for each of these direct, indirect, and moderation effects, they noted whether the effect was positive, negative, or statistically not significant. Researchers were guided by a codebook, shown in Table 1, which describes the types of DCs and performance. This data entry process[3] resulted in an intercoder reliability between 95.4% and 100% (Kassarjian, 1977). The following section presents our findings for every twelve categories of DCs in three tables and explains whether and how each specific category was related to performance in exporting research.

3.4. Methodological and contextual profile of the reviewed studies

This subsection reports the methodological and contextual characteristics of the reviewed studies to provide a clearer picture of the evidence on which our synthesis rests and to highlight the extent of transparency and coverage across different contexts.

Our analysis of methodological characteristics rests on two major aspects of data collection and analysis methods. Accordingly, the vast majority of studies relied on quantitative survey data. 83% of the articles drew exclusively on surveys. A further 1.9% of studies relied on secondary data, while 15.1% of studies combined surveys with interviews.[4] In terms of analytical techniques, 79.2% of the studies used structural equation modelling, 18.9% applied multivariate or hierarchical regression, and 1.9% employed panel data analysis. Overall, the methodological profile is relatively homogeneous, dominated by cross-sectional survey designs and the use of structural equation modelling.

Regarding the study-contextual characteristics, we summarize our analysis based on the industry coverage, firm size, average export experience, cultural profile, and institutional profile within the scope of the reviewed studies. Following Liu et al. (2021), we classified industry orientation into multiple-industry, manufacturing, and service contexts. Based on this classification, 81.1% of the studies examined firms from multiple industries, 17.0% focused on manufacturing, and 1.9% focused on services. Within the set of single-industry studies (18.9%), sectors included apparel (7.5%), electronics (3.8%), furniture (1.9%), information and communications technology (1.9%), and IT services (1.9%). The predominance of multi-industry samples indicates a lack of sectoral depth, although it demonstrates the wide applicability of the DC-performance relationship in exporting.

Turning to firm size, most studies reported mixed samples that included small, medium, and large firms (45.3%). A further 41.5% of

[3] Each DC-performance effect was coded individually. As a result, one study could generate multiple entries in our dataset. When presenting results in Tables 2, 3, and 4, these were grouped by substantive content, which explains why multiple DC-performance links from the same study may appear across different lines (e.g., Weerawardena et al., 2015).

[4] Data associated with DC-performance link were extracted only from surveys in studies combining surveys with interviews.

Table 1
Concepts used in the taxonomy.

Coding dimensions	Concepts	Definition	Source
Hierarchical nature of DCs in exporting research	Lower order	Activities and processes based on specific tasks, such as competencies related to export marketing-mix development.	Morgan and Slotegraaf (2012)
	Intermediate	Processes, through which multiple specialized capabilities are integrated, representing a higher-level group of capability for the planning and operation of multiple lower-order capabilities.	
	Higher-order	DCs reflecting learning-based processes touching upon a wide variety of lower-order and intermediate capabilities, as well as entailing transforming resources and capabilities to address environmental dynamism.	
Organizational unit of DCs in exporting research	Individual	DCs that evolved, developed and are deployed at the individual level, involving personal expertise, skill development, and independent actions within the firm.	Morgan and Slotegraaf (2012)
	Group	DCs that evolved, developed and are executed by groups or teams within the organization. These DCs are more integrated than individual-level skills but still focus on specific operational tasks or strategic functions.	
	Organizational	Firm-wide DCs that involve coordination, integration, and alignment of activities across multiple departments, leading to a higher-level organizational efficiency, resource deployment, and strategy execution.	
	Inter-organizational	DCs that span across firm boundaries, involving collaborations, partnerships, and resource pooling with external entities such as suppliers, distributors, or other partners. These DCs leverage external relationships to drive innovation and competitive advantage.	
Content of financial metrics in the performance construct	Financial	Financial performance is measured through metrics such as profitability, revenue, return on investment, sales growth, market share, and operating profit.	Brax et al. (2021), Liu et al. (2021), and Tan and Sousa (2015)
	Non-financial	Non-financial performance includes metrics such as customer satisfaction, brand reputation, market innovations, employee development, time to market, stakeholder satisfaction, and research and development.	
	Both financial and non-financial	This category combines financial and non-financial metrics to measure performance, such as combining profitability with customer satisfaction and profitability.	
Unit of analysis at which performance was measured	Export venture	Export venture refers to the performance of a single product or product line exported to a specific foreign market.	Katsikeas et al. (2000) and Sousa et al. (2008)
	Firm	Firm-level analysis focuses on the corporation's total exports.	

studies focused specifically on SMEs. Only 1.9% reported exclusively medium-sized firms, and another 1.9% focused solely on large firms. In 9.4% of studies, firm size was not reported at all. While SMEs receive considerable attention, findings are often not disaggregated by firm size, which limits insights into whether DCs function differently in smaller versus larger exporters. Export experience was even less frequently reported, with 73.6% of the studies providing no information about the average years of exporting for sample firms. Among those who did report, average experience ranged from just under five years to more than thirty years, with most falling below fifteen years.

For home-country cultural profiles, 52.8% of studies were conducted in high power distance-, 49.1% of studies in high individualism-, 49.1% of studies in high uncertainty avoidance-, 47.2% of studies in high masculinity-, and 52.8% of studies in high long-term orientation-, and 52.8% of studies in high indulgence-countries (Hofstede, 2001). We also examined the institutional environments of the home countries in which the DC-performance relationships were tested by using the six Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2011; World Bank, 2024). For each study, the scores for six dimensions were averaged to produce a composite score, which was then split at the sample median (66.42) to categorize institutional environments as either strong or weak. The distribution shows that 49% of studies were conducted in home countries with relatively weaker institutional environments and 51% in countries with stronger institutions. Beyond this

aggregate balance, and when considered together with the cultural profiles above, the evidence proved too fragmented to yield consistent contextual patterns.

4. Findings

In total, we identified 72 idiosyncratic DCs across the sample studies, each operationalized and measured in distinct ways. These DCs span from task-specific, functional activities to higher-order, strategic capabilities that enable firms to adapt, innovate, and respond to challenges in dynamic export settings. In analyzing their substantive content, several patterns became apparent. Nearly half of the capabilities (around 46%) are related to functional skills developed for executing specific tasks or purposes through firm functions such as marketing, sales, procurement, or manufacturing (e.g., international dynamic marketing capability (Ciszewska-Mlinarič, Siemieniako, & Wójcik, 2024) and channel management (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)). Approximately 18% of the DCs reflected an emphasis on calibrating, integrating, or extending existing structures, routines, or processes in line with changing international market conditions, enabling faster strategic alignment and continual enhancement of value creation processes (e.g., strategic agility (Luu, 2024); organizational agility (Cho, Jeong, Kim, & Cho, 2023)). Around 12% of the DCs demonstrated an innovation orientation, encompassing abilities to generate and implement new ideas, products, processes, or technologies, as well as improve existing ones (e.g., innovation orientation (Hughes et al., 2019); technological innovation (Donbesuur, Ampong, Oqusu-Yirenkyi, & Chu, 2020)). Roughly 9% of the DCs emphasized networking-related abilities to acquire knowledge, resources, or experience through inter-organizational collaborations (e.g., partnership knowledge exchange (Khalid & Bhatti, 2015); network learning capability (Weerawardena et al., 2015)). DCs with a market-oriented focus accounted for about 7% of the sample, centering on understanding international markets to tailor offerings and strategies accordingly (e.g., proactive market orientation (Kolbe, Frasquet, & Calderon, 2022); export market exploration (Skarmeas, Lisboa, & Saridakis, 2016)). Notably, despite the growing relevance of digitalization, social media, and AI in B2B contexts, DCs explicitly linked to these domains (e.g., social media capability (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022); big data utilization (Kim, 2022); firm digital transformation (Luu, 2023) appeared in only a small subset of studies, indicating a considerable gap in the current literature.

Upon analysis, distinct trends emerged in the distribution of DCs across hierarchical orders and organizational units. In terms of hierarchical order, higher-order DCs, found in the majority (i.e., 79.2%) of the sample, emerged as the most prevalent one. These were followed by intermediate-order DCs that were examined as performance drivers in 49.1% of the studies. Conversely, lower-order DCs were the least represented, as identified in only a small fraction (i.e., 3.8%) of the sample. When it comes to the organizational unit at which DCs were conceptualized, organizational-level DCs were the most frequently observed as they were examined as performance predictors in 79.2% of reviewed studies. Inter-organizational DCs followed, accounting for a smaller but notable portion of 28.3% of studies. On the other hand, group-level DCs represented a much smaller (i.e., 13.2%) fraction of the sample. Interestingly, individual-level DCs were the least frequently examined ones, as these were found in only 9.4% of articles.

Performance constructs had various titles such as export performance[5] (e.g., Kim, 2022), international performance (e.g., Gnizy, 2019), and product-market performance (e.g., Faroque et al., 2021). Most (i.e., 56%) articles used performance constructs containing both financial and non-financial metrics. Performance outcomes with only non-financial indicators were set as the outcome of DCs in 38% of the sample articles. Only 30% of the articles contained performance with only financial indicators as a consequence of DCs. Regarding measurement levels, the majority (i.e., 80%) of articles assessed performance at the firm level, with a smaller fraction (i.e., 22% of articles) focusing on export venture-level performance. In 84.9% of studies, DCs were conceptualized to have a direct effect on performance, while in 22.6% of the sample, DCs were hypothesized and tested for their effect on performance through mediating variables. 20.8% of the sample developed and tested the moderating effect of different variables between DCs and performance. We also reviewed the specific objectives and frames of reference embedded within these performance constructs. Because this extended analysis did not yield distinguishable patterns across hierarchical orders or organizational units, the full descriptive results are reported in Appendix B.

4.1. Lower-order DCs by organizational unit

Lower-order DCs focus on export-task-specific activities, which stabilize day-to-day export operations and provide the basis for higher-order strategic initiatives. Lower-order individual DCs correspond to individual skills by which employees integrate relevant resources with their own abilities to carry out specific exporting tasks, while lower-order group level DCs combine individual skills and relevant resources to perform exporting tasks by groups or departments to accomplish organizational goals and deliver organizational responsibilities (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). Lower-order DCs at the organizational level underlie the firm's ability to carry out exporting tasks to achieve its goals, whereas interorganizational-level DCs at this order characterize the ability to integrate knowledge and skills across organizational borders to perform specific exporting tasks associated with the firm's goals (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012).

While our analysis did not identify any lower-order DC at the individual and organizational levels, there was only one article that confirmed the positive effect of a group-level lower-order DC (see Table 2), namely the international key account management capability, on market performance, which covered the contribution of customer relationships to the financial performance of the firm (Jean et al., 2015). We also identified one lower-order DC at the interorganizational level, negotiation flexibility, which refers to the capacity of firms and their foreign partners to adjust prior agreements, accommodate unexpected circumstances, and renegotiate terms in response to dynamic export conditions. This capability, however generated a statistically-not-significant effect on export performance (Celec, Globocnik, & Kruse, 2014). Interestingly, its interaction with entrepreneurial orientation was found to be significant, with the latter weakening the expected positive role of negotiation flexibility on export performance.

4.2. Intermediate DCs by organizational unit

Intermediate DCs represent architectural capabilities, which orchestrate numerous lower-order specialized capabilities and their related resource inputs (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). At the individual level, these DCs involve the ability of employees to deliver more complex and integrative exporting activities that require coordination of resources and multiple lower-level tasks (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). Our analysis did not reveal an intermediate DC at the individual level that is conceptualized as a performance driver (see Table 3). (See Table 3.)

Intermediate DCs at the group level represent DCs of teams, departments, or functions combining individual level skills with relevant resources to carry out more complex and integrative exporting activities (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). In our sample, we were able to identify five such DCs that would involve resources and skills of teams, including export employees or those from other departments such as marketing,

[5] Our analysis is limited to 21 studies (48 DC–performance relationships) that specifically measured export performance. Among these, 95.2% of the studies (87.5% of the relationships) tested financial outcomes, 52.4% of the studies (50.0% of the relationships) examined strategic outcomes, and 23.8% of the studies (20.8% of the relationships) assessed customer satisfaction outcomes.

Table 2
Lower-order DCs and performance relationships across measurement levels.

	Relation to performance			Measurement level			
Organizational unit	*Financial*	*Non-financial*	*Both financial and non-financial*	*Firm level*	*Export venture Level*	Mediation	Moderation
Individual							
–							
Group (1 study, 1 DC)	***+ (1)–(0) NS (0)***	***+ (0)–(0) NS (0)***	***+ (0)–(0) NS (0)***				
International Key Account Management Capability (Jean et al., 2015)	Market Performance + (1)			1/1*		–	–
Organizational							
–							
Inter-organizational (1 study, 1 DC)	***+ (0)–(0) NS (0)***	***+ (0)–(0) NS (0)***	***+ (0)–(0) NS (1)***				
Negotiation Flexibility (Celec et al., 2014)			Export Performance NS (1)		1/1*	–	Entrepreneurial Orientation — (1)

* Denominator shows the number of studies in which a particular DC is set to predict performance.

finance or information technology, to perform more complex exporting tasks. Specifically, four of these include personal selling, pricing, traditional marketing communication, and social media, which were tested separately for their direct effect on financial and non-financial performance, producing mostly results that are statistically not significant across three samples (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022). Another intermediate DC at this level was e-commerce marketing with a positive effect on non-financial performance (Gregory et al., 2019).

Intermediate DCs at the organizational level are deployed by an exporting firm to carry out more complex integrative exporting activities through cross-functional coordination (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). Most of the DCs at the intermediate order fell into this category. According to our findings, extant research devoted attention to those DCs that underlie mainly marketing management (e.g., Wang, Chen, Wang, & Li, 2017; Weerawardena et al., 2015) and its complex and integrative processes such as development of new offerings (e.g., Colclough et al., 2019; Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022), channel management (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022), e-commerce (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022), service delivery (Martin, Javalgi, & Ciravegna, 2018), customer relationship management (Kaleka, 2012), and market information gathering (Kaleka, 2012) that need cross-functional coordination to be effectively delivered. To a more limited extent, other DCs, such as those related to technology investment and deployment, were also set as performance drivers in the sample studies (Bianchi, Glavas, & Mathews, 2017; Jin & Cho, 2018). While in most cases, DCs were positively related to performance constructs with non-financial and both financial and non-financial metrics, their influence on performance constructs with financial indicators were statistically not significant in the majority of the cases (e.g., Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022; Kaleka, 2012). In most cases, performance was measured at firm level, whereas a limited number of studies assessed performance outcomes at the export venture level.

Intermediate DCs at the inter-organizational level are used to conduct complex integrative exporting activities by leveraging resources and skills of other organizations (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). Our review identified eight such DCs, which are primarily related to networking, taking the form of broad networking capabilities (e.g., Zucchella et al., 2019), as well as their more specific types, such as network development and extension (Mitręga, 2023), and partnering (e.g., Wójcik & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2021). Other performance-driving DCs receiving limited scholarly attention were supply chain integration (Kim, 2022), joint action (Chang, Chen, & Huang, 2015), and inter-organizational international marketing capabilities dispersion (Gnizy, 2019). DCs in this category were mostly related to performance constructs with both financial and non-financial indicators under various titles such as foreign market performance, export performance, and co-created value. In most of these cases, DCs had a positive impact on performance. These were followed by DCs set to predict performance and, in most cases, confirmed to predict it using non-financial indicators such as relationship performance and export expansion. Performance with financial indicators was set to be driven by DCs only in two studies (Gnizy, 2019; Zucchella et al., 2019), both with results that are statistically not significant. Except for one study (Chang et al., 2015), in all studies, performance was measured at the firm level.

At the intermediate order, only two studies hypothesized a mediating relationship between DCs and performance. Specifically, Gregory et al. (2019), found that the influence of e-commerce marketing capabilities on export venture e-commerce performance was mediated by distribution - and promotion efficiencies, which enhanced the coordination of online promotional activities and improved distribution mechanisms. On the other hand, Falahat et al. (2018) found that networking capability indirectly influenced foreign market performance through marketing strategy, as it provided access to market intelligence and external resources.

In four studies, scholars tested the boundary conditions of DCs' effect on performance. Specifically, positive moderation effects were more prevalent, with factors such as entrepreneurial orientation amplifying the impact of digital marketing capabilities on firm performance (Wang, 2020). However, in some cases, the same moderators constrained DC effectiveness. For example, Celec et al. (2014) found that entrepreneurial orientation weakened the link between service capabilities and export performance. Non-significant effects were also observed, such as firm size showing no statistically significant impact of digital marketing capabilities' influence on firm performance (Wang, 2020) and partner's coercive power use failing to moderate network management capabilities – relationship performance link (Mitręga, 2023).

4.3. Higher-order DCs by organizational unit

Higher-order DCs refer to learning capabilities that mark configuration of resources to improve skills, activities and routines to address the dynamically changing environments (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). Higher-order individual-level DCs mark the employees' ability to learn in a way that changes their individual resource bases and enhances their skills at lower levels (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). We identified five such DCs pertaining to employees and managers (see Table 4). Two of them, namely the employee international strategic renewal behavior and employee international new venture behavior reflect two dimensions of employee intrapreneurship (Dung & Thuy-Giang, 2021), while three comprise managerial DCs of human capital (e.g., entrepreneurial, managerial, academic experience), social capital (e.g., contacts

Table 3
Intermediate DCs and performance relationships across measurement levels.

	Relation to performance			Measurement level		Mediation	Moderation
Organizational unit	*Financial*	*Non-financial*	*Both financial and non-financial*	*Firm level*	*Export venture level*		
Individual	–	–	–				
–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Group (4 studies, 5 DCs)	***+ (4)–(0) NS (20)***	***+ (4)–(0) NS (9)***	–				
Personal Selling Capability (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)	Sales Revenue NS (3)	Customer Satisfaction + (2) NS (1)		3/3*		–	–
	Profitability + (2) NS (1)			3/3		–	–
Pricing (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)	Sales Revenue NS (3)	Customer Satisfaction NS (3)		3/3		–	–
	Profitability + (2) NS (1)			3/3		–	–
Traditional Marketing Communication Capability (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)	Sales Revenue NS (3)	Customer Satisfaction NS (3)		3/3		–	–
	Profitability NS (3)			3/3		–	–
Social Media Capability (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)	Sales Revenue NS (3)	Customer Satisfaction + (1) NS (2)		3/3		–	–
	Profitability NS (3)			3/3		–	–
E-commerce Marketing Capabilities (Gregory et al., 2019)		Export Venture E-commerce Performance + (1)			1/1*	Distribution Efficiency + (1/1) Promotion Efficiency + (1/1)	–
Organizational (16 studies, 16 DCs)	***+ (6)–(0) NS (18)***	***+ (10)–(1) NS (6)***	***+ (6)–(1) NS (2)***				
Marketing Capabilities (Jin & Cho, 2018; Weerawardena et al., 2015; Zucchella et al., 2019)	Export Performance + (1) NS (1)	Export Performance NS (1)		1/2	1/2	–	–
		Innovation Performance + (2)		2/2		–	–
		Early Internationalization + (2)		2/2		–	–
International Marketing Capability (Zahoor & Lew, 2023)			Export Performance + (1)		1/1	–	–
Marketing Implementation Capabilities (Wang et al., 2017)			Export Performance + (1)		1/1	–	–
Informational Capabilities (Kaleka, 2012)	Export Venture Performance NS (1)				1/1	–	–
Customer Relationship Management (Kaleka, 2012)	Export Venture Performance + (1)				1/1	–	–
Service Capability (Celec et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2018)			Export Venture Performance + (1) — (1)		2/2	–	Entrepreneurial Orientation — (1/2)
Digital Marketing Capabilities (Wang, 2020)		Firm Performance + (1)		1/1		–	Entrepreneurial Orientation + (1) Firm Size NS (1)
Market and Innovation Capability (Celec et al., 2014)			Export Performance NS (1)		1/1	–	Entrepreneurial Orientation + (1)
Technological Capabilities (Jin & Cho, 2018)	Export Performance + (1)				1/1	–	–
Technology-related International Networks (Bianchi et al., 2017)			SME International Performance + (1)	1/1		–	–

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Table 3 (*continued*)

Organizational unit	Relation to performance			Measurement level		Mediation	Moderation
	Financial	*Non-financial*	*Both financial and non-financial*	*Firm level*	*Export venture level*		
Internet Technology capabilities (Bianchi et al., 2017)			SME International Performance NS (1)	1/1		–	–
Product Exploration/ Product Development Explorative Capabilities (Colclough et al., 2019; Lisboa et al., 2011)		Innovation Performance + (1)	Future Performance + (1)	2/2		–	–
Product Exploitation / Product-Development Exploitative Capabilities (Colclough et al., 2019; Lisboa et al., 2011)		Innovation Performance + (1)	Current Performance + (1)	2/2		–	–
New Offering / Product Development Capability (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022; Kaleka, 2012)	Export Venture Performance NS (1)	Customer Satisfaction + (3)		3/4	1/4	–	–
	Sales Revenue NS (3)			3/3		–	–
	Profitability NS (3)			3/3		–	–
Channel Management (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)	Sales Revenue + (2) NS (1)	Customer Satisfaction NS (3)		3/3		–	–
	Profitability + (1) NS (2)			3/3		–	–
E-commerce (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)	Sales Revenue NS (3)	Customer Satisfaction — (1)		3/3		–	–
	Profitability NS (3)	NS (2)		3/3		–	–
Inter-organizational (9 studies, 8 DCs)	***+ (0)–(0) NS (2)***	***+ (4)–(0) NS (1)***	***+ (6)–(0) NS (1)***				
Networking Capabilities (Acosta et al., 2018; Falahat et al., 2018; Zucchella et al., 2019)	Export performance NS (1)	Export performance NS (1)	Foreign Market Performance NS (1)	2/3		Marketing Strategy + (1/3)	–
			International Performance + (1)	1/3		–	–
Supply Chain Integration (Kim, 2022)		Export Performance + (1)	Productivity + (1)	1/1		–	Company Size NS (1) Product Complexity + (1)
Network Expansion Capabilities (Mitręga, 2023)			Export Performance + (1)	1/1		–	Brand resources (Own vs. Partner's) + (1)
Network Development Capabilities (Mitręga, 2023)		Relational Performance + (1)		1/1		–	Power Use + (1)
Network Management Capabilities (Mitręga, 2023)		Relational Performance + (1)		1/1		–	Partner's Coercive Power Use NS (1)
Partnering / Partnership Management (Khalid & Bhatti, 2015; Wójcik & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2021)		Subsequent Export Expansion + (1)	Export performance + (1)	2/2		–	–
			Initial Export Expansion + (1)	1/1		–	–
Joint Action (Chang et al., 2015)			Co-created Value + (1)		1/1	–	–
Inter-Organizational International Marketing Capabilities Dispersion (Gnizy, 2019)	International Performance NS (1)			1/1		–	–

in other firms and political positions), and cognition (e.g., ability to connect internationalization to performance) (Mostafiz, Sambasivan, & Goh, 2019a, 2019b). Except for the case of managerial human capital, DCs in this category were positively linked to performance outcomes measured with non-financial and both financial and non-financial metrics, while their relation to performance with only financial indicators is not clear. All performance constructs were measured at the firm level.

Higher-order group-level DCs correspond to DCs of teams to learn and adapt by modifying processes, resources, and routines and DCs at lower levels needed to carry out the required tasks (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). In our sample, two studies examined the same DC, which is the international entrepreneurial orientation of the top management team. It was found to have a positive effect on all related performance constructs (Acosta, Crespo, & Agudo, 2018; Faroque et al., 2021). Both studies measured performance at the firm level.

Higher-order organizational-level DCs represent the ability of firms to learn about their environment, transform their resources and improve their DCs at lower levels to address dynamism in their operational setting (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). We identified 30 higher-order DCs at the organizational level in our sample studies. While in a few studies, there was a generic operationalization of DCs comprising their sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring aspects (e.g., Fredrich, Gudergan, &

Table 3
Higher-order DCs and performance relationships across measurement levels.

Hierarchical nature	Relation to performance			Measurement level		Mediation	Moderation
Organizational unit	*Financial*	*Non-financial*	*Both financial and non-financial*	*Firm level*	*Export venture level*		
Individual (4 studies, 5DCs)	***+ (3)–(2) NS (4)***	***+ (6)–(0) NS (3)***	***+ (2)–(0) NS (0)***				
Employee International Strategic Renewal Behavior (Dung & Thuy-Giang, 2021)			Firm Export Performance + (1)	1/1*			
Employee International New Business Venture Behavior (Dung & Thuy-Giang, 2021)			Firm Export Performance + (1)	1/1			
Managerial Human Capital (Mostafiz et al., 2019a; Mostafiz et al., 2019b; Mostafiz et al., 2021)	Financial Performance NS (3)	Non-financial Performance NS (3)		3/3		International Opportunity Recognition (Mostafiz et al., 2019a) NS (1/3) Foreign Market Knowledge (Mostafiz et al., 2019b) NS (1/3) Market Orientation (Mostafiz et al., 2021) NS (1/3)	
Managerial Social Capital (Mostafiz et al., 2019a, Mostafiz et al., 2019b, Mostafiz et al., 2021)	Financial Performance + (2) — (1)	Non-financial Performance +(3)		3/3		International Opportunity Recognition (Mostafiz et al., 2019a) + (1/3) Foreign Market Knowledge (Mostafiz et al., 2019b) + (1/3) Market Orientation (Mostafiz et al., 2021) + (1/3)	
Managerial Cognition (Mostafiz et al., 2019a; Mostafiz et al., 2019b; Mostafiz et al., 2021) 3 studies	Financial Performance + (1) — (1) NS (1)	Non-financial Performance + (3)		3/3		International Opportunity Recognition (Mostafiz et al., 2019a) + (1/3) Foreign Market Knowledge (Mostafiz et al., 2019b) + (1/3) Market Orientation (Mostafiz et al., 2021) + (1/3)	
Group (2 studies, 1 DC)	+ (1)–(0) NS (0)	+ (1)–(0) NS (0)	+ (1)–(0) NS (0)				
International Entrepreneurial Orientation (Acosta et al., 2018; Faroque et al., 2021)	Export Financial Performance + (1)	Product-market Performance + (1)	International Performance + (1)	2/2			
Organizational (34 studies, 30 DCs)	***+ (11)–(1) NS (14)***	***+ (10)–(0) NS (9)***	***+ (24)–(0) NS (5)***				
Dynamic Capabilities / Corporate-level Dynamic Capabilities (Fredrich et al., 2022; Gonçalves et al., 2021)	Internationalization + (1)		Firm Performance + (1)	2/2			
	Growth + (1)			1/1		Internationalization (Fredrich et al., 2022) + (1)	Collaboration Intensity (Fredrich et al., 2022) + (1) R&D Intensity (Fredrich et al., 2022) + (1)
International Dynamic Marketing Capability (Ciszewska-Mlinarič et al., 2024)			International Performance + (1)	1/1		Adaptation to Foreign Markets + (1) Product Development Capability + (1)	Environmental dynamism NS (1)
Learning about Foreign Market / Environmental learning / Market-focused learning (Weerawardena	Export Performance NS (1)	Export Performance NS (1)	Export Performance NS (1)	3/3			

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Table 3 (*continued*)

Hierarchical nature	Relation to performance			Measurement level		Mediation	Moderation
Organizational unit	*Financial*	*Non-financial*	*Both financial and non-financial*	*Firm level*	*Export venture level*		
et al., 2015; Wójcik & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2021; Zucchella et al., 2019)							
		Innovation Performance + (1) NS (1)		1/1			
Internally-focused Learning (Weerawardena et al., 2015)		Innovation Performance + (2)		2/2			
International Marketing Agility / Marketing Agility / Organizational Agility/ Strategic Agility (Asseraf et al., 2019; Cho et al., 2023; Khan, 2020; Luu, 2024)		New Products Advantage + (1)	International Market Performance + (1)		1/1*		Promotion Adaptation (Asseraf et al., 2019) + (1) Product Adaptation (Asseraf et al., 2019) NS (1)
			Firm Performance + (2)	2/2			Market Complexity (Khan, 2020) + (1/2) Potential Absorptive Capacity (Cho et al., 2023) - (1/2) Realized Absorptive Capacity (Cho et al., 2023) + (1/2)
			Firm International Performance + (1)	1/1		Agile Slack (Luu, 2024) + (1)	
Value-Adding Capabilities (Pinho & Prange, 2016)	International Performance — (1)			1/1			
Disruption Capabilities (Pinho & Prange, 2016)	International Performance NS (1)			1/1			
Exploratory Marketing Capabilities/ Export Market Exploration/ Market-Related Exploratory Capabilities (Asseraf & Shoham, 2019; Lisboa et al., 2011; Skarmeas et al., 2016)	Export Market Effectiveness NS (1)		International Strategic Performance + (1)	1/1	1/1		
	Future Export Performance + (1)		Future Performance + (1)	2/2			
Exploratory Technological Capabilities (Asseraf & Shoham, 2019)			International Strategic Performance + (1)		1/1		
Consolidation Capabilities (Pinho & Prange, 2016)	International Performance + (1)			1/1			
Threshold Capabilities (Pinho & Prange, 2016)	International Performance NS (1)			1/1			
Export Market Exploitation / Market-related Exploitative Capabilities (Lisboa et al., 2011;Skarmeas et al., 2016)	Export Market Effectiveness + (1)		Current Performance + (1)	2/2			
	Future Export Performance NS (1)			1/1			
Strategic Orientation (Ahmed, Babu, Rahman, Uddin, & Dey, 2023)			Performance of Mature-born	1/1		Strategic Renewal + (1)	

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Table 3 (*continued*)

Hierarchical nature	Relation to performance			Measurement level		Mediation	Moderation
Organizational unit	*Financial*	*Non-financial*	*Both financial and non-financial*	*Firm level*	*Export venture level*		
			Global Firms + (1)				
Entrepreneurial Capabilities/ Entrepreneurship Orientation/ Entrepreneurial competence/ International Entrepreneurship Orientation/ Entrepreneurial Orientation (Bianchi et al., 2017; Falahat et al., 2018; Khalid & Bhatti, 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2013; Zucchella et al., 2019)	Export Performance + (1)	Export Performance + (1)	Export Performance + (2)	3/3			
			SME International Performance NS (1)	1/1			
			Foreign Market Performance + (1)	1/1		Marketing Strategy + (1)	
International Entrepreneurial Opportunity Recognition (Bianchi et al., 2017)			SME International Performance + (1)	1/1			
Innovative Capabilities / Innovation Capability / Innovation Orientation / Innovation Capacity (Hughes et al., 2019; Kolbe et al., 2022; Oura et al., 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2013; Zucchella et al., 2019)	Export Performance + (1)	Export Performance + (2)	Export Performance + (3)	4/5	1/5		
Marketing Innovations (Bodlaj et al., 2020)	Export Growth + (1)			1/1			Geographic Diversification + (1)
Organizational Innovation (Donbesuur et al., 2020)			SME's International Performance + (1)	1/1			Institutional Environment Specificity + (1) Institutional Environment Enforceability + (1)
Technological Innovation (Donbesuur et al., 2020)			SME's International Performance NS (1)	1/1			Institutional Environment Specificity + (1) Institutional Environment Enforceability + (1)
R&D Intensity (Filatotchev & Piesse, 2009)		Export Intensity + (1)		1/1			
	Sales Growth + (1)			1/1			
International Market Orientation (Acosta et al., 2018)			International Performance NS (1)	1/1			
Proactive Market Orientation (Kolbe et al., 2022)			Export Performance NS (1)	1/1			
Reactive Market Orientation (Kolbe et al., 2022)			Export Performance + (1)	1/1			
Dynamic Absorption Capacity (Rodriguez et al., 2013)		Innovation Performance + (1)		1/1			
Big Data Utilization (Kim, 2022)		Export Performance NS (1)	Productivity + (1)	1/1			Company Size NS (1) Product Complexity + (1)

(*continued on next page*)

Table 3 (*continued*)

Hierarchical nature	Relation to performance			Measurement level		Mediation	Moderation
Organizational unit	*Financial*	*Non-financial*	*Both financial and non-financial*	*Firm level*	*Export venture level*		
Firm Digital Transformation (Luu, 2023)			Export Performance + (1)	1/1		Employee Exploration Innovation + (1) Employee Exploitation Innovation	
Base of the Pyramid Orientation (Nguyen et al., 2023)			Export Performance + (1)	1/1		Environmental Sustainability Practices + (1)	
Market Research (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)	Sales Revenue + (2) NS (1) Profitability NS (3)	Customer Satisfaction NS (3)		3/3 3/3			
Digital Intelligence Capability (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022)	Sales Revenue + (1) NS (2) Profitability NS (3)	Customer Satisfaction NS (3)		3/3			
Business Modelling (Wójcik & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2021)			Export Performance + (1)	1/1			
Inter-organizational (5 studies, 5 DCs)	***+ (0)–(0) NS (0)***	***+ (4)–(0) NS (0)***	***+ (4)–(0) NS (1)***				
Partnership Knowledge Exchange / Information Exchange (Chang et al., 2015; Khalid & Bhatti, 2015)			Initial Export Expansion + (1)	1/1			
			Subsequent Export Expansion + (1)	1/1			
			Co-created Value + (1)		1/1		
Supplier Innovativeness (Jean & Sinkovics, 2010)		Relationship performance + (1)		1/1			
Relationship Learning / Relationship-specific Knowledge (Chang et al., 2015; Jean & Sinkovics, 2010)		Relationship performance + (1)		1/1			
			Co-created Value + (1)		1/1		
Network Learning Capability (Weerawardena et al., 2015)		Innovation Performance + (2)		2/2			
Strategic Flexibility of International Strategic Alliances (Zahoor & Lew, 2023)			Export Performance NS (1)		1/1		

Bouncken, 2022), DCs that have been most frequently hypothesized and tested as antecedent of performance in this category were learning, entrepreneurial orientation, exploration and exploitation, innovation, agility, and market orientation. These were both examined as broader constructs and as constructs that are specialized for the study context. For example, innovation in its broader form referred to innovations and technological advancements on market offerings (e.g., Hughes et al., 2019; Oura, Zilber, & Lopes, 2016), whereas marketing innovations covered the development of novel sales channels, pricing methods, and distribution strategies and the support of new product sales in export markets (Bodlaj, Kadic-Maglajlic, & Vida, 2020). Learning was operationalized specifically for external and internal environment (Weerawardena et al., 2015), while market orientation took the form of international market orientation and proactive and reactive market orientation (Kolbe et al., 2022). Little attention has been paid to DCs related to digitalization (i.e., digital transformation, digital intelligence, big data utilization) as drivers of performance (Cortez & Hidalgo, 2022; Kim, 2022; Luu, 2023). In most of the studies, DCs in this category were set as predictors of performance with combined non-financial and financial metrics, with most of those reporting positive effects. However, DC-performance relationship was not clear in cases where DCs were tested for their effect on performance with only financial and only non-financial indicators. Except for two studies (Asseraf et al., 2019; Khalid & Bhatti, 2015), performance was assessed at the firm level.

Higher-order inter-organizational-level DCs mark the ability to learn, modify and transform organizational and inter-organizational resources, routines, and DCs at lower orders (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012). We were able to identify five such DCs driving performance, which took the form of information exchange (Chang et al., 2015), supplier innovativeness (Jean & Sinkovics, 2010), relationship learning (Jean & Sinkovics, 2010), network learning (Weerawardena et al., 2015), and strategic flexibility (Zahoor & Lew, 2023). Studies in this category never related DCs to a performance construct with only financial indicators. Except for a statistically-not-significant association, studies reported that higher-order inter-organizational DCs contribute to performance with non-financial (in the form of relationship performance and innovation performance) (Jean & Sinkovics, 2010; Weerawardena et al., 2015) and both financial and non-financial metrics (operationalized as export expansion and co-created value) (Chang et al., 2015; Khalid & Bhatti, 2015). These were mostly assessed at the firm, rather than the export venture level.

At the higher order, indirect relationships between DCs and performance were observed in eleven studies, with all showing positive mediation effects except for managerial human capital, which exhibited

Table 4
Alternative DCs to be operationalized and tested in future research as predictors of performance.

	Hierarchical nature		
Organizational unit	Lower-order	Intermediate	Higher-order
Individual	Foreign customer identification	Foreign customer insight	Cultural intelligence
	Foreign customer call handling	Adaptation of foreign customer value proposition	Emotional intelligence
	Foreign customer interactions management	Foreign customer complaints handling	Creativity
	Contract design and adaptation		Problem solving
	Foreign key account management		Improvisation
	Cross-cultural negotiation		Entrepreneurship
Group	Export financing	International product development	Cross-border business model transition capability
	Export receivables management	Export pricing	Cross-functional integration
	Hedging	Price escalation management	Digital trade facilitation capability
		Export marketing communication	Project-based innovation
		Team export selling	
		Foreign customer service delivery	
Organizational	Adaptive export compliance management	Export market analysis	Strategic reconfiguration
	Recruitment of export staff	Export potential assessment	Sustainability-oriented innovation
	Training and development of export staff	Export market identification	Radical product innovation
	Responsive supply chain coordination	Export planning	Ambidexterity
		Export strategy implementation	
		Digital exporting	
		Export logistics management	
		Foreign customer relationships management	
		Electronic foreign customer relationships management	
		Export control	
		Export disruptions / barriers management	
Interorganizational	Export partner selection	Export channel management	Network relationships management
	Export distribution	Management of relationships with research and development institutions	Value-co-creation
	Export promotion agencies relationship management		Coopetition capabilities
	Bank relationships management		Partner development
	Legal consultant relationships management		Supply chain resilience
	Reverse logistics		

Source: Authors' own elaboration, augmented by prior literature (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Gölgeci & Kuivalainen, 2020; Gregory, Karavdic, Zou, 2007; Kalubanga & Gudergan, 2022; Kouropalatis et al., 2019; Leipziger et al., 2024; Leonidou, 2004; Leonidou et al., 2011; Li & Chan, 2019; Mu, 2015; Cavalcanti Barros Rodrigues & Gohr, 2022; Stadtfeld & Gruchmann, 2024; Teece, 2007; Tolstoy et al., 2022; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

a non-significant indirect effect through foreign market knowledge (Mostafiz et al., 2019b), international opportunity recognition (Mostafiz et al., 2019a), and market orientation (Mostafiz, Sambasivan, & Goh, 2021). Several key mechanisms emerged in linking DCs to firm performance. Falahat et al. (2018) found that entrepreneurial orientation contributed to superior foreign market performance through supporting the development of an effective marketing strategy. In a related vein, Ciszewska-Mlinarič et al. (2024) demonstrated that international dynamic marketing capability contributed to international performance through adaptation to foreign markets and product development capability. These DCs allowed firms to apply existing resources and market knowledge to product-market diversification. As a result, firms could anticipate foreign customer needs and adjust to foreign market conditions more effectively.

Eight studies examined moderating effects on the relationship between higher-order DCs and performance, with most showing positive interactions. For instance, geographic diversification strengthened the influence of marketing innovations on export growth, as firms operating in diverse international markets accumulated market knowledge that helped them introduce innovations more effectively (Bodlaj et al., 2020). Similarly, market complexity amplified the effect of marketing agility on firm performance, as firms that adapted quickly to dynamic environments were better able to manage external uncertainties and competitive pressures (Khan, 2020). However, potential absorptive capacity weakened the impact of organizational agility on firm performance; while firms that emphasize acquiring and assimilating knowledge aim to enhance their adaptability, they may misinterpret market signals, which in turn hinders their ability to recognize opportunities and apply relevant insights in rapidly changing environments (Cho et al., 2023). Moreover, some moderators had no significant impact. Product adaptation failed to influence the relationship between international marketing agility and new product advantage (Asseraf

et al., 2019), while environmental dynamism did not significantly moderate the effect of international dynamic marketing capability on performance (Ciszewska-Mlinarič et al., 2024).

4.4. Contextual considerations

Although study characteristics point to important contingency factors in review studies, examining the role of the aforementioned contextual characteristics on the effect of DCs on the performance of exporting firms was not possible due to two reasons. First, grouping studies by firm size and industry was not possible because there were no sets with a substantial number of studies with an exclusive focus on a specific firm size or industry sector to draw safe, data-driven comparisons. Second, although cultural distance and institutional distance between home and host countries could provide valuable insight about the nature of DCs' effect on performance of exporting firms, because the reviewed studies did not report host countries' information or home-host country average cultural/ institutional distance values, informing readers about the allocation of sample to high versus long cultural/ institutional home-host country distance was not possible. These led us to analyze DC-performance relationships in each of the twelve cells by their home country institutional and cultural characteristics (see Web Appendix C). Although the evidence proved too fragmented to yield consistent contextual patterns, some observations on categories with highest number of DC-performance relationships is possible. Accordingly: Studies reporting higher-order organizational level DCs with a positive effect on financial performance are more frequent in high uncertainty avoidance, low long-term orientation, and low indulgence countries. Studies reporting higher-order organizational level DCs with a positive effect on non-financial performance are more frequent in strong institutional profile, low power distance, low collectivism, high masculinity, and high indulgence countries. Studies reporting higher-order organizational level DCs with a positive effect on both financial and non-financial performance are more frequent in high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, and high indulgence countries.

5. Discussion, implications, and limitations

Our systematic review demonstrates that DCs explaining performance in exporting research are mostly of higher-order and pertain to organizational level, followed by intermediate organizational-level DCs and intermediate inter-organizational-level DCs. There is a clear pattern for DCs in these categories contributing to the performance of exporting firms when performance is measured using both financial and non-financial metrics. Our review also reveals that lower-order DCs have not been literally linked to the performance of exporting firms, while intermediate level DCs reveal a notable concentration on marketing-related capabilities. DCs were most frequently tested for their effect on performance using a combination of financial and non-financial metrics, and in most cases, the measurement was at the firm level rather than the export venture level. Additionally, we show that in most cases where DCs were connected to performance, the effect was hypothesized as direct, with explanations addressing DCs' effect on performance through mediating and/or under moderating variables being limited in number. These overarching findings present the core empirical patterns and clarify the main contours of how DCs have been linked to the performance of exporting firms. Building on these insights, the following sections unpack their theoretical underpinnings, draw out practical implications for managers, and outline directions for future research.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our review offers, within the scope of exporting, a deeper analysis to the research link between DCs and performance that is well-established in past review studies (e.g., Dayangan & Aykol, 2024; Kahiya & Warwood, 2022; Pfajfar et al., 2024). Our synthesis results in certain theoretical implications on the hierarchical order and organizational levels of DCs, as well as the mechanisms through which they shape exporting firms' performance. With regard to hierarchical order, the scholarly focus on higher-order DCs can be ascribed to their strategic nature, which enables firms to navigate uncertainty, sustain long-term competitive advantage, and drive innovation in international markets (Schilke et al., 2018; Teece, 2007). Their potency to provide firms with the ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure resources across different functions makes them particularly relevant in highly dynamic exporting environments where adaptability and learning are key to survival (Morgan, Kaleka, & Katsikeas, 2004). Moreover, higher-order DCs inherently encapsulate and orchestrate lower-order and intermediate DCs, which reinforce their perceived centrality in explaining the performance of exporting firms (Collis, 1994; Schilke, 2014a; Winter, 2003). This reading also aligns with the logic of resource orchestration, which emphasizes how managers structure, bundle, and leverage the firm's resource base to configure and activate underlying capabilities in dynamic environments (Sirmon, Hitt, Ireland, & Gilbert, 2011). The prominence of higher-order DCs in the literature also reflects their stronger and more visible links to performance outcomes, as confirmed empirically by Fainshmidt et al. (2016), who demonstrated that higher-order DCs exhibit stronger performance effects and often work indirectly via lower-order DCs. Very little attention to lower-level DCs, on the other hand, can be explained by their granular and operational nature, where these are often embedded in routine-based activities, and may not be explicitly recognized as performance drivers despite their foundational role in ensuring executional excellence in exporting (Helfat & Winter, 2011; Winter, 2003). In fact, Wilden et al. (2019) highlight that lower-order DCs often underpin everyday processes that sustain existing product–market operations, while higher-order DCs are more likely to overcome path dependencies and support transformational change. In addition to conceptual reasons, this imbalance could also be attributed to the relative absence of existing scales for lower-order DCs, problems related to the availability and accessibility of key informants to answer questions related to lower-level DCs, as well as the tendency to adopt DC scales from strategic management literature that mainly concentrates on higher-order scales.

The concentration of intermediate-order DCs on marketing-related processes suggests that scholars have recognized the pivotal role of market-oriented capabilities in internationalization success. Marketing-related DCs, such as customer relationship management and marketing implementation capabilities, directly influence how firms engage with foreign customers, penetrate markets, and sustain competitive differentiation (Kaleka, 2012; Wang et al., 2017). While research attention on intermediate DCs as predictors of exporting firm's performance is worthwhile, notably, these constructs seem adapted from the domestic marketing literature and therefore need more specific export-related adaptations. Further, the strong emphasis on marketing-related DCs as intermediate-order DCs has, at the same time, narrowed the scope of inquiry, potentially overshadowing other important functional areas, such as supply chain integration, technological capabilities, and operational flexibility. Broadening attention to these areas, which DCV also highlights as critical for sustaining competitive advantage (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000), is essential if exporting research is to fully capture a complete understanding of how intermediate-order DCs shape exporting firms' performance.

Concerning organizational units, that DCs driving performance predominantly pertain to the organizational level can be attributed to the structural centrality of firm-wide strategic decision-making in international operations and the relatively stable, as well as the scalable nature of organizational-level DCs that makes them easier to measure and compare across firms. This visibility and measurability create a bias in empirical research designs, where organizational-level constructs are more readily captured through survey instruments and cross-firm comparisons (Wilden et al., 2016). Our findings about predominance of organizational-level DCs in explaining performance concur with the

findings of Fainshmidt et al. (2016), who emphasized that firm-wide strategic capabilities are most frequently linked to performance outcomes across industries. Similarly, Scheuer and Thaler (2023) highlighted the overrepresentation of organizational-level capabilities in business research. However, DCV also stresses that organizational-level DCs rest on individual- and group-level microfoundations, such as managerial cognition, decision-making routines, and collaborative problem-solving, which enable organizational adaptability, decision-making agility, and resource orchestration (Helfat & Martin, 2015; Schulze & Brusoni, 2022; Teece, 2007). The relative neglect of these levels, despite their foundational role, therefore, represents not only an empirical gap but also a theoretical blind spot in understanding how DCs originate and operate across different levels of analysis to shape the performance of exporting firms.

Comparing our taxonomy-based results with those that adopt alternative taxonomies highlights points of convergence and divergence. As such, Schilke's (2014a) distinction between first- and second-order capabilities resembles what exporting studies often examine as higher-order DCs may in fact contain two layers. One is the orchestration of lower-level and intermediate routines, which is commonly visible in the empirical body. The other is a regenerative, "learning-to-learn" activity that enables firms to renew those routines over time. While the first layer dominates the current knowledge (e.g., studies often examine how firms orchestrate product adaptation, customer- and channel-relationship management, and supply-chain coordination processes as capabilities (Fang & Zou, 2009; Morgan et al., 2018), the second is rarely captured, even though it represents the foundation of capability renewal. Jie et al. (2023) provide another perspective by combining the locus of transactions (internal versus external) with the strategic logic of exploration and exploitation. Seen through this classification, our finding that intermediate-order DCs concentrate on marketing-related processes reflects an emphasis on externally oriented, exploitative capabilities, such as customer interfacing and channel execution, which help firms adapt existing offerings to market signals. What is less developed are internal, explorative renewal processes, such as resource renewal and reconfiguration, that sustain long-term competitiveness. The dominance of organizational-level DCs is also consistent with this view: externally exploitative processes lend themselves more easily to survey-based firm-level measures, while explorative and regenerative processes tend to unfold at individual and group levels, where they remain under-investigated (cf. Schilke, 2014a; Zollo & Winter, 2002). Similar patterns have been noted in international marketing capability research, where empirical work tends to focus on mid-level, firm-level capabilities and pays less attention to micro-level and regenerative processes (Morgan & Slotegraaf, 2012; Pfajfar et al., 2024). This convergence across alternative taxonomies strengthens the robustness of our classification and clarifies that the asymmetries we identify are not artefacts of the chosen framework. Taken together, these alternative taxonomies not only validate the patterns we identified but also highlight what is absent, particularly the internal, exploratory, and micro-level capabilities that allow exporting firms to renew themselves continuously.

The fact that direct effects dominate the literature aligns with findings from other systematic reviews (Schilke et al., 2018), which highlight the prevailing assumption that DCs exert a straightforward and immediate influence on performance. However, this blanket approach overlooks the complex, process-driven nature of DCs, where indirect mechanisms such as knowledge recombination, learning, strategic adaptation, and resource reconfiguration play a crucial role in shaping performance outcomes (Helfat & Peteraf, 2009; Laaksonen & Peltoniemi, 2018). As we discussed earlier, higher-order DCs often appear more central in the literature because they encapsulate and orchestrate lower- and intermediate-level capabilities. In line with this reasoning, theoretical accounts also emphasize that such higher-level capabilities rarely produce performance outcomes on their own. Rather, they work indirectly by embedding and activating more operational layers of capability, which then carry the performance effect forward (Schilke, 2014a). Grounded in DCV, these intervening pathways frequently involve ordinary (operational) capabilities, which form part of the resource base that DCs reconfigure (Pitelis et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this mediating role of ordinary capabilities has been rarely examined in the empirical exporting literature. Recognizing and theorizing such mechanisms is critical to explaining how DCs contribute to long-term competitive advantage, rather than assuming a direct, immediate effect on firm performance. Given that DCs are inherently transformational processes that unfold over time, their effects are likely to be mediated by various mechanisms (Schilke et al., 2018). Despite the revelations of previous studies emphasizing context-specific nature of DCs' effect on their outcomes (Fainshmidt et al., 2016; Karna et al., 2016; Pezeshkan et al., 2016), our study also points to an underutilization of moderating factors in conceptualizing the DCs – performance relationship, corroborating findings by recent reviews (e.g., Baía & Ferreira, 2024; Pitelis et al., 2024). From an institutional theory perspective, this limited attention to contextual elements is problematic because institutions, understood as regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive structures, shape which capabilities are regarded as legitimate and effective in a given environment (Kostova et al., 2020; Scott, 2003). By undertheorizing contextual elements, the exporting literature risks portraying DCs as generic levers of performance, rather than mechanisms whose effectiveness depends on how they are matched to industry, firm size, and institutional or cultural environments.

When compared to previous systematic literature reviews on DCs, our results regarding the hierarchical nature of DCs reveal that while the link between higher-order DCs and performance in exporting is relatively well established, much less is known about how lower-order export-specific DCs contribute to performance. This finding aligns with the results of a similar review by Buzzao and Rizzi (2021) within the context of environmental management. Likewise, prior research has identified intermediate-level DCs as underexplored, often acknowledged in theory but rarely examined as distinct constructs (Fernandes, Hughes, Ferreira, & Veiga, 2023; Scheuer & Thaler, 2023). Compared to past review studies on the effect of DCs on performance, which generally report a positive and consistent impact of DCs on firm performance across different industries and contexts (e.g., Baía & Ferreira, 2024; Fainshmidt et al., 2016; Karna et al., 2016), our results show that, except for a few categories, one can hardly discover a pattern within the exporting research. This indicates that the relationship between DCs and performance in exporting remains fragmented, making it difficult to draw generalized conclusions. The variability in findings suggests that differences in conceptualization, measurement, and contextual factors might contribute to the inconsistencies observed in how DCs influence performance in exporting firms. Our examination of contextual characteristics and performance construct measurement indicates that reaching conclusions about contextual relevance requires more research in different contexts that are broadly and transparently described, as discussed in following sections.

5.2. Future research directions

Our review reveals three key areas for future research. First, there is a need to explain performance of exporting firms with lower-order DCs, as well as with DCs pertaining to individuals and groups in the exporting organizations, while higher-order DCs can be enhanced by those not examined in the exporting research. Second, the concentration of intermediate order DCs on marketing processes calls for the need to diversify intermediate DCs by recognizing the relevance of coordinating multiple functions and processes for exporting. Third, there is a need to provide depth and explanatory mechanisms to the DCs-performance relationship.

The dominance of higher-order DCs at the organizational-level in general calls for identification, operationalization, and testing of DCs at lower- and intermediate order, as well as DCs pertaining to individual, group, and interorganizational levels. With respect to hierarchical

orders, it is imperative to identify DCs that correspond to the specific activities and processes that are carried out in the firm for accomplishing export goals. Our analysis revealed a virtual non-existence of DCs examined at the lower-order, a concentration of DCs underlying marketing processes at the intermediate order, and a focus on learning and innovation-based DCs at the higher-order. While the need to identify DCs based on specific exporting tasks, namely the lower-order DCs, may seem more urgent, enriching the DCs at the intermediate order and identifying new learning-based scalable DCs to exporting processes at the higher order should not be overlooked. Such an attempt would require employing methods such as blueprinting of exporting processes or identifying the microfoundations of DCs deployed to achieve export-related goals. Blueprinting would facilitate the identification of export processes essential for serving foreign customers, such as market research, prospecting, order-taking, contract preparation, adaptation of offerings, and delivery (e.g., Albaum et al., 2008), and, in turn, enable researchers to identify and operationalize lower-order DCs based on the former.

Microfoundations, on the other hand, would help uncover the cognitive, behavioral, and structural mechanisms underpinning the development and deployment of DCs in exporting firms. Recognizing these micro-level mechanisms is crucial, as they shape how DCs are enacted at different hierarchical orders and organizational levels, ultimately influencing firms' adaptive capabilities in foreign markets (Barrales-Molina et al., 2014; Schilke et al., 2018). For example, some lower-order DCs in an exporting firm such as foreign customer interactions management may be grounded in microfoundations such as intercultural communication competence, real-time customer problem-solving, and frontline decision-making autonomy. Other than these, identifying and operationalizing DCs would also benefit from qualitative research that investigates single or multiple cases of exporters that successfully sense and seize opportunities, transform resources, and sustain high performance in dynamically changing export contexts. In-depth case studies could offer insights into the mechanisms underpinning capability deployment and scaling, while comparative analyses across firms could reveal patterns of successful DC evolution in response to export market dynamics.

With respect to organizational units, the dominance of research on the organizational level underscores the need to identify, operationalize, and test DCs developed and deployed at individual, group, and inter-organizational levels. This process first requires identifying the key individuals and groups within the exporting firm, as well as partner organizations, that integrate various resources in carrying out tasks to accomplish the firm's export-related goals. Depending on the company's structure, these individuals may include export salespeople, export managers, international marketing managers, international business managers, global key account managers, or international entrepreneurs (Katsikea, Theodosiou, & Makri, 2019; Theodosiou, Katsikea, Alarape, & Hardy, 2024). While groups may consist of export departments, international marketing divisions, or international business divisions, they can also correspond to teams that contribute to the accomplishment of export-related goals across departmental or functional borders. For example, employees in export or international marketing departments may collaborate with employees in research and development and production (e.g., for product development and adaptation for foreign markets), finance (e.g., for more effectively negotiating prices and payment and delivery terms with foreign customers), or information technology (e.g., for enhancing digital export channels and optimizing data-driven customer engagement strategies) (e.g., Leonidou, 2004; Leonidou, Palihawadana, & Theodosiou, 2011; Mu, 2015; Tolstoy, Nordman, & Vu, 2022). While most of the inter-organizational DCs examined in this review reflect those that integrate resources of importers, there are also other organizations partnering with the firms in attaining their goals, such as research institutions, export promotion agencies, and logistics firms. Additionally, financial institutions and export credit agencies help firms manage risk and overcome capital constraints in international trade (Leonidou et al., 2011). Further, technology service providers and digital platforms facilitate digital engagement, strengthening data-driven market expansion (Gregory et al., 2007). Identification and empirical examination of DCs for these individuals, groups, and partners would shed light on how specific DCs from various organizational unit origins contribute to performance of exporting firms.

Second, the concentration of intermediate DCs on marketing suggests a need to diversify DCs with a potential to drive export performance into those based on other functions, processes, and tasks to be integrated with those DCs based on marketing. For instance, financial capabilities such as export pricing and price escalation management are essential for firms to optimize revenue streams in volatile international markets (e.g., Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, 2007). Similarly, supply-chain related intermediate DCs, such as export logistics management, could play a crucial role in maintaining efficiency and responsiveness in cross-border transactions. Besides, given the potential of dynamic digital capabilities for sustained international growth (Warner & Wäger, 2019) and underrepresented status of technologically enabled capabilities (e.g., digitalization, social media, and AI), digital DCs such as electronic foreign customer relationship management and digital exporting could be explored for their effect on performance.

Table 5 presents DCs categorized within our taxonomy as potential predictors of performance in exporting research. For example, cross-cultural negotiation (individual level), hedging (group level), responsive supply chain coordination (organization level), and export distribution (interorganizational level) may serve as lower order DCs. These DCs reflect task-specific capabilities essential for export operations, such as mitigating financial risks (hedging), ensuring regulatory adaptability (export compliance management), and facilitating international market entry (export distribution). While these DCs form the foundation of exporting firms' adaptability, future research could also explore their integration with intermediate- and higher-order DCs to understand how they collectively enhance exporting firms' performance. Intermediate DCs, such as adaptation of foreign customer value proposition, export pricing, and export logistics management emphasize that exporting requires DCs involving coordination of financial operations and supply chain functions in addition to marketing. On the other hand, higher-order DCs that have been critical performance drivers in other contexts but have not been investigated in export settings might be cross-border business model transition capability, sustainability-oriented innovation capability, digital trade facilitation capability, partner development capability, and supply chain resilience capability (Kouropalatis, Giudici, & Acar, 2019; Leipziger, Kanbach, & Kraus, 2024; Li & Chan, 2019; Cavalcanti Barros Rodrigues & Gohr, 2022; Stadtfeld & Gruchmann, 2024). These DCs could be highly relevant for exporters as they involve the ability to continuously adapt business models across different international markets, navigate complex sustainability regulations in global trade, facilitate seamless digital trade operations, strengthen partnerships across diverse markets, and maintain supply chain stability in the face of geopolitical and logistical disruptions. Although we identified DCs in twelve different categories, we should also note that DCs do not function in isolation but rather operate in clusters (Wilden et al., 2016). Therefore, adopting configurational approaches can help identify constellations of DCs that drive export success. Future studies could investigate which combinations of lower-, intermediate-, and higher-order DCs create optimal performance outcomes across different export settings.

Third, our review also points to a need to incorporate mediators and moderators when conceptualizing the effect of DC's on exporting firm performance. With respect to mediating mechanisms, researchers could consider theoretically implied intervening mechanisms. For example, following Schilke et al. (2018), some mediators between DCs and performance transforming the resource base could be changes in operational capabilities, that is, ordinary capabilities which form part of the resource base that DCs reconfigure (Helfat & Winter, 2011; Pitelis et al.,

Table 5
Alternative DCs in exporting: Research directions on their performance implications.

	Hierarchical nature		
Organizational unit	Lower-order	Intermediate	Higher-order
Individual	**Foreign customer identification** *How does the ability to identify foreign customers impact market entry success through digital customer engagement strategies?*	**Foreign customer complaints handling** *How do effective complaint-handling capabilities enhance brand reputation in exporting, moderated by service digitalization?*	**Improvisation** *How does the ability to improvise enhance long-term customer retention through conflict resolution in foreign markets?*
Group	**Export financing** *How does an export firm's financial risk management capability affect cash flow stability and international growth, mediated by hedging effectiveness?*	**Export pricing** *How does dynamic export pricing capability influence market share through cost absorption strategies, moderated by foreign market turbulence?*	**Project-based innovation** *How does project-based innovation enhance export market penetration, mediated by customization and adaptation of products and services?*
Organizational	**Responsive supply chain coordination** *How does an export firm's ability to coordinate supply chains in an aligned and responsive manner enhance revenue growth in international markets, mediated by supply chain visibility?*	**Export logistics management** *How does efficient export logistics management enhance export profitability, mediated by supply chain visibility and moderated by cross-border regulatory complexity?*	**Sustainability-oriented innovation** *How do sustainability-driven innovations enhance export firm competitiveness, mediated by brand reputation and moderated by environmental regulation stringency?*
Interorganizational	**Export promotion agencies relationship management** *How does an export firm's relationship with promotion agencies impact export revenue, mediated by market intelligence acquisition and moderated by institutional voids?*	**Export channel management** *How does export channel management enhance international sales performance, mediated by supply chain integration and channel partner coordination?*	**Supply chain resilience** *How does supply chain resilience capability mitigate export disruptions and enhance revenue stability, mediated by adaptive risk mitigation strategies?*

2024). For example, OCs such as marketing implementation or supply chain coordination can function as conduits through which DCs exert their effects, yet these pathways are often assumed rather than explicitly measured in the exporting literature. Similarly, explanatory mechanisms suggested by Scheuer and Thaler (2023) (e.g., considering relational mediators associated with coordination with foreign partners) could be applied in exporting research. On the other hand, individual-, group-, and interorganizational-level performance may also serve as excellent mediators between DCs at the aforementioned levels and export firm performance. It is important to note that DCs, even if they are not at the organizational level, were set to predict performance at the organizational level. A few exceptions were interorganizational-level DCs leading to relationship performance (e.g., Chang et al., 2015); Jean & Sinkovics, 2010). However, individual performance could be, for instance, job performance for export salespeople, while group level performance could be operationalized as product development team performance and interorganizational level performance could take the form of network performance. Examining the intervening role of these performance outcomes between DCs and firm-level performance would also provide rich insights from a multi-level analysis perspective. On the other hand, DCs themselves should be considered for their intervening role between DCs and performance variables. As such, the transformation of lower-order DCs into intermediate and higher-order DCs (or vice versa) over time also warrants investigation.

It is critical that the boundary conditions acknowledge the international nature of the research context and involve variables peculiar to foreign business. In addition to factors such as market complexity, institutional environment enforceability, and R&D intensity (Bodlaj et al., 2020; Donbesuur et al., 2020; Kim, 2022) tested for their contingency effects, export experience, cross-border regulatory alignment, and geopolitical stability may condition the effects of DCs on performance by shaping firms' ability to respond to trade policy changes. Similarly, the role of artificial intelligence-driven decision support and industry digitalization levels could also be examined to understand how they alter the effectiveness of DCs on performance. Table 6 shows, for selected DCs for each category, how their effect on performance could be tested using mediating and under moderating mechanisms.

5.3. Managerial implications

Our review indicates that higher-order and intermediate order DCs at the organizational level are positively associated with the performance of exporting organizations. For export management, this points to the significance of developing DCs pertaining to these categories. For example, in order to develop a higher-order organizational level DC such as international dynamic marketing capability, the exporting firm can institutionalize regular foreign-market intelligence activities, create cross-functional structures that link marketing, sales, and product development, and set up formal routines for adapting products and communications to conditions in key export markets. On the other hand, the fact that intermediate-order organizational-level DCs improving performance are related to marketing implies channeling of managerial resources to develop and improve marketing DCs within the exporting firm. Performance implications for lower-order DCs cannot be safely drawn with the existing knowledge derived from the reviewed literature. This not only points to a need for exporting firms to collaborate with scholars and/or consultants to identify lower-level DCs, but also an opportunity to translate higher-order abstract DCs into lower-order indicators guiding exporters how a higher-order DC can be decomposed into processes pointing to clearer training and development needs. These efforts should also cover identification of these DCs at neglected individual and team levels to better design DC-development programs. Obviously, such DC-development programs should be designed based on the export organization within the company, for example the training program for a small company relying on a single export salesperson will have a narrower scope than that for an exporting firm using an export department and relying on a team of export employees.

5.4. Limitations

Our findings should be interpreted in acknowledgment of certain limitations. First, there is always a risk of missing some studies when conducting systematic literature reviews despite considerable search efforts. Relatedly, our decision to restrict eligibility to journals rated 2

and above in the Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide (2024) illustrates a trade-off. This quality threshold follows good practice in systematic reviews (e.g., Marinković et al., 2022; Saebi et al., 2019) and ensures consistency and comparability across included studies. As Tranfield et al. (2003) note, systematic reviews inherently involve a balance between maximizing coverage and safeguarding methodological quality. At the same time, this decision may have narrowed the scope of our sample, as contributions in lower-ranked or emerging journals were not included and could also hold valuable insights that fall outside our review. Prominent journals often influence which theoretical and empirical questions receive attention in a field (Palmié et al., 2024), yet some impactful work published in lower-ranked outlets may have been missed at the time of our review.

Second, our systematic literature review is limited to its scope and methodological characteristics. As such, we concentrated on the effect of specific categories of DCs on performance within the exporting research. This can be extended to the broader setting of international business or complemented with the examination of the same phenomenon within the context of other entry modes such as foreign direct investment. Methodologically, using different eligibility criteria in terms of journal quality, language, and study format would have resulted in a different sample with different results.

A further limitation concerns the ongoing challenge in empirically distinguishing DCs from ordinary capabilities. Although this distinction is central to the DCV (Helfat et al., 2007; Teece, 2014a; Winter, 2003), the boundary between the two is often blurred because some capabilities may serve both operational and dynamic purposes depending on the context and temporal scope (Helfat & Winter, 2011; Schilke & Helfat, 2025). In line with prior systematic reviews (Laaksonen & Peltoniemi, 2018; Pitelis et al., 2024; Schilke et al., 2018), we relied on the originating authors' conceptualization and operationalization of the focal capabilities rather than reclassifying them. This ensured consistency in coding and preserved comparability with prior DCV reviews. That said, we acknowledge this as a trade-off in that some constructs included as DCs in our sample (e.g., e-commerce marketing capabilities; Gregory et al., 2019) have been treated as ordinary capabilities in other studies (e.g., online marketing capabilities; Tolstoy et al., 2022). This reflects a broader conceptual ambiguity in the DCV literature, which has contributed to a proliferation of overlapping constructs and measurement approaches. While such ambiguity poses challenges for synthesis, it also underscores the relevance of our review in mapping and organizing the existing evidence base.

Despite the criticality of context in international marketing research, our review study was not able to sufficiently analyze how DC-performance relationship varied based on the study context and characteristics. As reported in the contextual and methodological profiles, this was, on the one hand, due to failure of sample studies to report contextual data (e.g., export experience, exporting method, host country profile[6]), and on the other hand, due to the aggregate approach adopted in sample studies to mostly report industry coverage as multiple and firm size as SMEs. This underscores the need for future studies to explicitly report contextual and methodological data to permit review studies on the subject to regularly analyze the role of study characteristics in changing the DCs' effect on performance, thereby helping to allow for more fine-grained theorizing and facilitating comparisons across studies, thus enhancing the interpretability and cumulative value of findings in the exporting literature.

Finally, we acknowledge that our systematic review primarily focused on quantitative studies. This was deemed necessary not only to examine hypothesized DC-performance links systematically, but also the limited number of qualitative studies investigating the same effect in the literature (only two studies by Evers (2011) and Hizarci Payne and Katrinli (2021)) prevented us from complementing the review of quantitative studies with a review of qualitative ones. While this confined our scope for capturing rich contextual processes, it also underscored the need for more future qualitative inquiry that can illuminate how DCs are enacted in practice and how they contribute to performance in diverse exporting contexts.

6. Conclusion

Our systematic literature review organizes the scattered knowledge on DCs' effect on performance in exporting research, which makes two contributions to the literature. First, we use a taxonomy that recognizes exporting as an activity involving business-to-business marketing and sales, where exporting success benefits from hierarchies of DCs ranging from scalable learning-based ones to more export-specific processes. These DCs may manifest in different units within and outside the exporting organization. This classification has allowed us to identify the categories of DCs most and least frequently examined in the extant literature as predictors of exporting firms' performance. This analysis also stimulated future research directions to identify, and test neglected but critical DCs across different hierarchical orders and organizational units, which ensures a more comprehensive, multi-order, and multi-level understanding of how exporting firms develop and deploy DCs. This will, in turn, enrich the explanations of how hierarchies of DCs at various levels shape firms' ability to achieve performance in exporting contexts. While previous systematic literature reviews classified DCs based on their hierarchical nature in international business literature (Brock & Hitt, 2024), our study extends this framework by incorporating the organizational unit of analysis, providing a more fine-grained analysis on the specific levels at which DCs operate and their direct implications for performance in exporting firms.

Second, we provide an organized framework of how different categories of DCs relate to performance in terms of sign, significance, content of metrics, measurement level, and directness. These efforts revealed both clear and unclear patterns about the way various categories of DCs influence different types of performance of exporting firms. Additionally, this synthesis has inspired future research directions focused on providing explanatory mechanisms that would clarify how DCs drive performance, as well as on identifying the boundary conditions that would shape the effectiveness of DCs in explaining performance and accounting for variations in their impact. While these add to accumulation of knowledge provided by past systematic reviews of categories of DCs on performance (Baía & Ferreira, 2024; Buzzao & Rizzi, 2021; Fainshmidt et al., 2016), our review goes one step further by explicitly categorizing DCs based on their position in exporting organizations and offering an updated and structured assessment of their varying influences on performance outcomes. It also updates and refines past reviews on DCs – performance relationship (Jie et al., 2023; Tan & Sousa, 2015) by systematically classifying DCs in exporting and assessing how their effects have been measured, tested, and interpreted across empirical studies.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Cagla Dayangan: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Bilge Aykol:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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[6] For example, no study reported profiles of host countries to which exporters sold their goods, making it impossible to comment on the role of cultural or institutional distance on DC-performance link.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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Appendices. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2026.01.003.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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