

Article

International Marketing Agility and Cost Leadership Strategies: A Qualitative Systematic Literature Review of Frontier Emerging Market Exporters in Advanced Economies

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Abstract: This study conducts a qualitative systematic literature review to examine how international marketing agility and cost leadership strategies support the competitiveness of frontier emerging market exporters in advanced economies. Drawing on the dynamic capabilities perspective, the review synthesizes prior research on marketing agility, strategic agility, cost based competition, environmental uncertainty, and business model innovation. The findings indicate that international marketing agility functions as a meta dynamic capability that enables exporters to sense market changes, respond rapidly to competitive pressures, and reconfigure resources across complex international environments. Cost leadership emerges as an adaptive strategy rather than a static advantage based solely on low production costs. The review further shows that environmental pressure strengthens the importance of agility and strategic adaptation, while the combination of international marketing agility and cost leadership can stimulate business model innovation and international competitiveness. The study offers theoretical and managerial implications for frontier emerging market exporters.

Keywords: International Marketing Agility; Cost Leadership Strategy; Frontier Emerging Markets; Advanced Economies; Business Model Innovation.

1. Introduction

The internationalization of firms from emerging economies has become increasingly important, with growing attention directed toward frontier emerging market exporters facing severe institutional, financial, technological, and infrastructural constraints. When entering advanced economies, these firms encounter sophisticated customers, strict regulations, intense competition, and rapidly changing market conditions. International expansion therefore requires not only geographic growth but also adaptive capabilities and competitive strategies, particularly international marketing agility and cost leadership. Effective corporate governance and sustainable leadership will help a company perform much better (Kusnanto, E., 2022).

Frontier exporters face a competitive paradox. Although they often benefit from lower labor and production costs, competing solely on price is insufficient in advanced markets that demand quality, innovation, reliability, sustainability, and responsiveness. Emerging market firms must therefore combine home-country advantages with new capabilities and strategic adaptation to transform traditional cost advantages into sustainable competitiveness (Kotabe & Kothari, 2016; Kalasin et al., 2014). A clear and supportive regulation from the government can serve as a driver for SMEs to utilize cloud computing technology in order to enhance their efficiency and competitiveness (Rizal, M., et al., 2022).

Cost leadership remains important but should be viewed as more than low cost production. Competitive export pricing depends on market information and the ability to adjust prices, resource allocation, product offerings, and customer responses as conditions

Received: August 27, 2026
Revised: September 7, 2026
Accepted: September 14, 2026
Published: September 30, 2026
Curr. Ver.: September 30, 2026



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change (Obadia, 2013; Tan & Sousa, 2011). Thus, cost leadership increasingly requires organizational flexibility and continuous adaptation. Regression trees offer advantages in identifying non linear relationships between market variables that are often undetected by traditional models such as the capital asset pricing model (Permana, N., et al, 2024).

International marketing agility is central to this process because it enables firms to sense, interpret, and rapidly respond to international market changes. Research highlights its importance for overcoming institutional and competitive disadvantages, particularly for emerging market firms operating in advanced economies (Asseraf et al., 2019; Gomes et al., 2020; Khan, 2020). Agility has become increasingly valuable amid turbulence, technological disruption, supply-chain instability, and environmental uncertainty (Christofi et al., 2021; Ahammad et al., 2021).

From the dynamic capabilities perspective, international marketing agility can be viewed as a higher order capability that helps firms sense opportunities, seize possibilities, and reconfigure resources (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 2016). Its value, however, depends on how firms translate agility into concrete strategic actions such as innovation, market responsiveness, and adaptive cost management (Zhou et al., 2019; Osei et al., 2019).

One important pathway is cost leadership. Agile exporters can identify cost pressures, optimize operations and product portfolios, and rapidly adjust export pricing. Cost leadership may therefore represent an adaptive strategy shaped by international market intelligence rather than a static position based only on scale or low-cost production.

This relationship also supports business model innovation (BMI), involving changes in how firms create, deliver, and capture value (Teece, 2010; Zott & Amit, 2010). Strategic agility and flexibility can support BMI, while BMI can improve export outcomes and competitiveness (Clauss et al., 2019; Miroshnychenko et al., 2021; Najafi-Tavani et al., 2023). Environmental pressure may further accelerate these relationships by encouraging firms to redesign supply chains, pricing, products, digital channels, and business models.

Despite growing research, the literature remains fragmented across international business, marketing, strategic management, agility, dynamic capabilities, and business model innovation. This study therefore conducts a qualitative systematic literature review to integrate these perspectives and explain how international marketing agility supports adaptive cost leadership, business model innovation, and sustainable competitiveness among frontier emerging market exporters in advanced economies.

2. Literature Review

The internationalization of frontier emerging market exporters has attracted increasing attention because these firms face substantial institutional, financial, technological, and infrastructural constraints. When entering advanced economies, they encounter sophisticated customers, strict regulations, intense competition, and rapidly changing market conditions. Consequently, international expansion requires not only geographic growth but also adaptive capabilities and competitive strategies, particularly international marketing agility and cost leadership.

Although frontier exporters may benefit from lower labor and production costs, competing solely on price is insufficient in advanced markets that demand quality, innovation, reliability, and responsiveness. Cost leadership should therefore extend beyond low-cost production to include competitive pricing, process efficiency, and the ability to adjust resources and market offerings as conditions change (Obadia, 2013; Tan & Sousa, 2011).

International marketing agility is central to this process because it enables firms to rapidly sense, interpret, and respond to changes in customer demand, competitor behavior, institutional requirements, and market opportunities. Research demonstrates its importance for emerging market firms competing in advanced economies, particularly under conditions of turbulence and environmental uncertainty (Asseraf et al., 2019; Gomes et al., 2020; Khan, 2020; Ahammad et al., 2021).

From a dynamic capabilities perspective, international marketing agility can be viewed as a meta-dynamic capability that enables firms to sense opportunities, seize possibilities, and reconfigure marketing-related resources (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 2016). Its strategic value depends on how firms transform agility into concrete actions, including market responsiveness, innovation, and adaptive cost management (Zhou et al., 2019; Osei et al., 2019).

One important pathway is cost leadership. Agile exporters can identify cost pressures, optimize operations and product portfolios, and adjust export pricing more effectively. Cost

leadership should therefore be understood as an adaptive strategy continuously shaped by market intelligence and rapid organizational responses rather than a static advantage based solely on low-cost production.

The relationship between agility and cost leadership also supports business model innovation (BMI), which involves changes in how firms create, deliver, and capture value. Agile firms can adapt product offerings, distribution channels, pricing structures, customer relationships, and international value configurations, thereby improving export competitiveness (Teece, 2010; Zott & Amit, 2010; Clauss et al., 2019; Najafi-Tavani et al., 2023).

Environmental pressure further intensifies these relationships. Market turbulence, external crises, technological disruption, and institutional complexity can threaten established strategies but also stimulate experimentation, innovation, and strategic renewal. Frontier exporters may therefore need to reconfigure supply chains, digitalize customer interactions, revise pricing, and redesign their business models to remain competitive.

Despite growing research, the literature remains fragmented across international business, marketing, strategic management, dynamic capabilities, and business model innovation. Therefore, this qualitative systematic literature review aims to integrate these perspectives and explain how international marketing agility supports adaptive cost leadership, business model innovation, and sustainable competitiveness among frontier emerging market exporters in advanced economies.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesize fragmented knowledge on international marketing agility, cost leadership strategies, and the international competitiveness of frontier emerging market exporters in advanced economies. A systematic review provides a transparent and structured process for identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing dispersed evidence while reducing potential researcher bias (Tranfield et al., 2003). The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of relationships, mechanisms, contextual conditions, and strategic outcomes rather than statistically aggregate effect sizes (Torraco, 2016).

The review follows the principles of systematic evidence synthesis proposed by Tranfield et al. (2003) and applies the PRISMA 2020 framework to enhance transparency in study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and evidence synthesis (Page et al., 2021). The methodology combines structured review procedures with qualitative thematic synthesis and conceptual integration.

The review addresses five research questions concerning: (1) the conceptualization of international marketing agility; (2) organizational capabilities supporting agility; (3) the contribution of agility to cost leadership; (4) environmental and institutional conditions influencing this relationship; and (5) strategic outcomes, including business model innovation, export performance, and international competitiveness. These questions examine the broader mechanisms linking agility, efficiency, adaptation, and competitiveness.

The review procedure consists of four stages: planning, searching, screening, and qualitative synthesis. During planning, the research problem, objectives, conceptual boundaries, and eligibility criteria are defined. The search stage identifies relevant studies using predefined search strings, followed by duplicate removal and title, abstract, and full-text screening. Eligible studies are subsequently analyzed through qualitative coding and thematic synthesis.

The search strategy combines four conceptual domains: international marketing agility, cost leadership and competitive pricing, frontier or emerging market firms, and advanced economy competition. Relevant Boolean search terms include marketing agility, strategic agility, cost leadership, cost advantage, competitive pricing, frontier emerging markets, exporters, and advanced economies. Additional concepts such as dynamic capabilities, business model innovation, export performance, strategic flexibility, and environmental uncertainty are also included where relevant.

The inclusion criteria focus on peer-reviewed journal articles in international business, marketing, strategy, and management that address agility, cost-based competitiveness, emerging or frontier markets, exporters, SMEs, and international competition. Non-peer-reviewed publications, purely domestic studies, and research without conceptual relevance to

internationalization or competitive strategy are excluded. Explicit eligibility criteria improve transparency and reduce selective citation bias (Tranfield et al., 2003; Page et al., 2021).

Study selection occurs in three stages: record consolidation and duplicate removal, title and abstract screening, and full-text assessment. The process is documented using a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram showing identified, screened, excluded, and included studies.

The included studies are evaluated according to research-objective clarity, theoretical appropriateness, research-design transparency, data collection and analysis, clarity of findings, contribution to the research questions, and relevance to frontier or emerging market internationalization. Studies may be classified according to their methodological and conceptual contribution to strengthen the credibility of the synthesis.

Data are extracted through a structured review matrix covering publication details, country context, firm type, theoretical framework, methodology, key constructs, agility antecedents, cost leadership mechanisms, contextual conditions, strategic outcomes, empirical findings, theoretical contributions, and research limitations. This process supports systematic comparison and the identification of recurring or contradictory findings (Page et al., 2021).

The final studies are analyzed using qualitative thematic synthesis. The analysis proceeds through three stages: open coding, identifying concepts such as market sensing, strategic responsiveness, cost efficiency, resource reconfiguration, and business model innovation; theme development, grouping these concepts into higher-order themes; and conceptual integration, explaining how agility supports cost leadership and international competitiveness (Torraco, 2016).

The analytical framework examines four dimensions: capabilities, including international marketing agility and strategic flexibility; strategies, including cost leadership and competitive pricing; contextual conditions, including environmental pressure and institutional uncertainty; and outcomes, including business model innovation, export performance, and international competitiveness. The framework is grounded in the dynamic capabilities perspective of sensing, seizing, and resource reconfiguration (Teece, 2007).

Finally, findings are synthesized through a narrative-thematic approach that compares theoretical foundations, empirical contexts, methodologies, and major findings. The review emphasizes convergence, divergence, underlying mechanisms, and research gaps. Its rigor is strengthened through transparency, traceability, consistency, and reflexivity (Tranfield et al., 2003; Page et al., 2021). Overall, this methodology provides a rigorous basis for explaining the capability foundations, strategic mechanisms, contextual conditions, and international outcomes associated with international marketing agility and cost leadership among frontier emerging market exporters.

4. Results

The qualitative systematic literature review reveals that the competitiveness of frontier emerging market exporters in advanced economies is shaped by the interaction between international marketing agility, cost leadership, environmental pressure, and business model adaptation. These firms cannot rely solely on traditional cost advantages because advanced markets involve sophisticated customers, intense competition, institutional complexity, and rapidly changing conditions (Khan, 2020; Kotabe & Kothari, 2016). International marketing agility functions as a higher-order capability that enables firms to sense market changes, respond rapidly, and reconfigure marketing resources, while cost leadership increasingly requires continuous adaptation of pricing, efficiency, supply arrangements, and value propositions (Asseraf et al., 2019; Gomes et al., 2020; Teece et al., 2016).

The review identifies five major findings. First, international marketing agility is a critical meta-dynamic capability involving market sensing, rapid response, and resource reconfiguration. It enables firms to identify changing customer preferences, competitive developments, and external threats, make timely strategic decisions, and adjust marketing activities, pricing, channels, and value propositions (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 2016). Studies by Asseraf et al. (2019), Osei et al. (2019), Khan (2020), and Khan et al. (2025) confirm its importance for emerging and frontier market firms operating under resource and institutional constraints.

Second, cost leadership should be understood as an adaptive and capability-driven strategy rather than merely the exploitation of low labor or production costs. Sustainable cost-based competition requires continuous optimization of production costs, export pricing,

supply chains, distribution efficiency, resource allocation, and customer value propositions (Obadia, 2013; Tan & Sousa, 2011).

Third, international marketing agility supports cost leadership by enabling firms to identify changes in price sensitivity, demand conditions, competitor behavior, and market turbulence. Agile firms can rapidly modify pricing, products, distribution arrangements, and operational processes, thereby transforming market intelligence into competitive efficiency. Khan et al. (2025) provide direct evidence that cost leadership mediates the relationship between international marketing agility and business model innovation.

Fourth, environmental pressure acts as an important contextual catalyst. Economic uncertainty, geopolitical disruption, technological change, supply-chain instability, and institutional complexity increase the value of agility and strategic flexibility (Ahammad et al., 2021; Christofi et al., 2021). Environmental pressure can encourage firms to redesign cost structures, search for alternative suppliers, revise pricing, develop new distribution channels, digitalize customer interactions, and modify business models.

Fifth, the interaction between international marketing agility and cost leadership supports business model innovation. Agile exporters can redesign product offerings, pricing structures, distribution channels, customer access, digital platforms, supply networks, and value creation activities. Previous studies show that strategic flexibility and absorptive capacity support business model innovation, while business model innovation contributes to export-related outcomes (Miroshnychenko et al., 2021; Najafi-Tavani et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings support the following strategic framework: Environmental Pressure → strengthens relationships.

International Marketing Agility → Adaptive Cost Leadership → Business Model Innovation → International Competitiveness

International marketing agility may also directly influence business model innovation, indicating that the relationship is not purely linear. The comparison of previous empirical studies further confirms the importance of agility as a strategic capability, environmental conditions as contextual influences, and business model innovation as a key outcome.

The review also identifies several research gaps. Existing studies have largely focused on the relationship between marketing agility and performance, while its role in enabling cost-based strategies remains underexplored. Research has also insufficiently examined the sequence through which international marketing agility is transformed into cost leadership and subsequently into business model innovation. Furthermore, environmental pressure has often been treated as a background condition rather than an active catalyst of strategic adaptation.

Frontier emerging market exporters require more than traditional low-cost advantages to compete successfully in advanced economies. Their long-term competitiveness depends on the ability to sense market changes, rapidly adapt marketing activities, and transform market intelligence into efficient competitive strategies. International marketing agility acts as a meta-dynamic capability, cost leadership functions as an adaptive strategic mechanism, and environmental pressure strengthens their contribution to business model innovation and international competitiveness.

5. Discussion

The findings of this qualitative systematic literature review provide a deeper understanding of how international marketing agility and cost leadership interact to support the competitiveness of frontier emerging market exporters in advanced economies. International success cannot be explained solely by traditional cost advantages; instead, competitiveness increasingly depends on the ability to sense market changes, respond rapidly to competitive pressures, reconfigure resources, and adapt cost structures and value propositions (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2025).

International marketing agility should therefore be understood as a meta-dynamic capability rather than simply organizational speed. It involves market sensing, responsiveness, flexibility, and resource reconfiguration, enabling frontier exporters to compensate for resource limitations through faster learning and strategic adaptation (Gomes et al., 2020; Khan, 2020; Teece, 2007). Khan (2020) found that marketing agility improves emerging market firms' performance in advanced economies, particularly under high market complexity, while Ahammad et al. (2021) showed that different forms of agility generate different outcomes depending on competitive and environmental conditions.

The review also challenges the traditional view of cost leadership as a stable advantage based on low production costs. Frontier exporters face additional costs related to logistics, compliance, product adaptation, quality requirements, exchange-rate uncertainty, and customer service. Consequently, cost leadership must be continuously renewed through market intelligence, strategic responsiveness, and efficiency improvements without reducing product quality or customer value (Obadia, 2013; Tan & Sousa, 2011).

The findings demonstrate that marketing agility and cost leadership are complementary rather than contradictory. Agility helps firms detect inefficiencies, respond to pricing pressures, adjust distribution, and reallocate resources more effectively. Khan et al. (2025) further found that international marketing agility supports cost leadership, which subsequently contributes to business model innovation (BMI). In contrast, Najafi-Tavani et al. (2023) showed that efficiency-centered BMI can strengthen cost advantages and export performance. Together, these findings suggest a dynamic cycle:

International Marketing Agility → Cost Leadership → Business Model Innovation → Cost Advantage and Export Performance. Comparison with eight previous studies shows consistent evidence that agility, efficiency, environmental adaptation, and business model renewal are interconnected. Asseraf et al. (2019) highlighted agility as a strategic marketing capability, Osei et al. (2019) demonstrated its development under emerging economy constraints, and Zhou et al. (2019) emphasized the influence of market turbulence. Khan (2020) linked agility with performance in advanced markets, while Ahammad et al. (2021) demonstrated its multidimensional and context-dependent nature. Other studies confirmed that strategic flexibility, absorptive capacity, and efficiency-centered BMI contribute to innovation, cost advantage, and export performance (Miroshnychenko et al., 2021; Najafi-Tavani et al., 2023). Khan et al. (2025) provide the strongest direct support for the integrated mechanism identified in this review.

Environmental pressure also acts as a strategic catalyst. Market turbulence, technological disruption, institutional uncertainty, and supply-chain instability increase the importance of agility by encouraging firms to reconsider existing strategies. Frontier exporters may respond by identifying alternative suppliers, redesigning pricing structures, digitalizing customer interactions, modifying distribution channels, and adapting their business models (Ahammad et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2025).

The review contributes theoretically by positioning international marketing agility as a meta-dynamic capability linking market sensing with strategic reconfiguration. It also redefines cost leadership as a dynamic strategy requiring continuous adaptation and highlights BMI as both an outcome and source of competitive advantage. The study further contributes to international business research by focusing on frontier emerging market exporters, which face significant institutional and resource constraints (Teece, 2007).

From a managerial perspective, firms should integrate marketing intelligence with cost and efficiency decisions. Managers need systems that rapidly identify changes in customer demand, competitor pricing, market complexity, and environmental risks. Cost leadership should not rely on indiscriminate cost cutting but on efficiency-enhancing innovation and business model adaptation that preserve customer value.

Overall, the review demonstrates that international marketing agility and cost leadership are mutually reinforcing mechanisms. The strongest integrated explanation is: International Marketing Agility → Adaptive Cost Leadership → Business Model Innovation → Export Competitiveness

Environmental pressure strengthens this relationship by increasing the need for rapid sensing, resource reconfiguration, and adaptive cost management. Thus, frontier emerging market exporters can achieve sustainable competitiveness by transforming agility into adaptive efficiency and business model innovation.

6. Conclusions

This qualitative systematic literature review examined the relationship between international marketing agility and cost leadership strategies among frontier emerging market exporters competing in advanced economies. The findings show that sustainable international competitiveness cannot rely solely on traditional advantages such as low production costs or inexpensive labor. Instead, firms must continuously sense foreign market changes, respond rapidly to opportunities and threats, and reconfigure their marketing and strategic resources (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2025).

International marketing agility functions as a meta-dynamic capability that helps exporters address market complexity, environmental uncertainty, institutional differences, and intense competition (Asseraf et al., 2019; Gomes et al., 2020; Khan, 2020). Through market sensing, rapid responsiveness, and resource reconfiguration, firms can transform market intelligence into actions that strengthen international competitiveness.

Cost leadership should also be viewed as an adaptive rather than static strategy. Frontier exporters cannot depend indefinitely on home-country cost advantages because international expansion involves logistics, regulatory, quality, technological, and customer-related pressures (Obadia, 2013; Tan & Sousa, 2011; Kotabe & Kothari, 2016). Effective cost leadership therefore requires continuous adjustment of pricing, supply chains, resource allocation, distribution, and value propositions.

The review further shows that international marketing agility and cost leadership are complementary. Agility enables firms to identify and interpret changing foreign market conditions, while cost leadership translates this capability into efficiency and competitive advantage. This relationship is particularly important for resource-constrained frontier exporters because agility supports more effective resource allocation and faster adaptation to competitive changes (Osei et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2019).

Khan et al. (2025) provide strong evidence that international marketing agility contributes directly and indirectly to business model innovation through cost leadership strategies. Cost leadership therefore serves not only as a competitive positioning strategy but also as a mechanism supporting business model transformation. This is reinforced by research highlighting the roles of strategic flexibility, absorptive capacity, and business model innovation in improving adaptation and international competitiveness (Miroshnychenko et al., 2021; Najafi-Tavani et al., 2025).

Environmental pressure also acts as a strategic catalyst. Market turbulence, uncertainty, technological disruption, and institutional complexity increase the importance of agility and encourage firms to redesign pricing, distribution, supply chains, and business models (Ahammad et al., 2021; Christofi et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings support the following strategic logic: International Marketing Agility → Adaptive Cost Leadership → Business Model Innovation → International Competitiveness. Environmental pressure strengthens the importance of rapid sensing, responsiveness, and resource reconfiguration. The study integrates international marketing, strategic agility, cost leadership, and business model innovation, while suggesting that managers should combine market intelligence with cost-management decisions. Ultimately, frontier emerging market exporters achieve stronger long-term competitiveness when agility transforms cost advantages into adaptive, renewable, and innovation-oriented strategic capabilities.

7. Limitation

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this qualitative systematic literature review has several limitations. First, the review is subject to database and publication coverage limitations because systematic reviews depend on selected databases, search terms, publication types, and language restrictions (Tranfield et al., 2003; Page et al., 2021). Relevant studies may therefore have been excluded due to indexing limitations, non-English publication, or different terminology.

Second, research on frontier emerging market exporters remains limited compared with studies of firms from larger emerging economies. Consequently, some insights were derived from broader research on emerging markets, SMEs, international business, and strategic agility, which may limit generalizability across frontier economies.

Third, the reviewed studies used diverse theoretical frameworks, methods, industries, and performance measures. Although this diversity broadens understanding, it also creates conceptual heterogeneity and makes direct comparisons difficult, particularly because marketing agility, strategic agility, organizational flexibility, and dynamic capabilities are related but distinct concepts (Christofi et al., 2021; Gomes et al., 2020).

Fourth, this study employed qualitative thematic synthesis rather than quantitative meta-analysis. It therefore identifies patterns and mechanisms but does not estimate the statistical strength of relationships among international marketing agility, cost leadership, business model innovation, and international performance.

Fifth, the findings are strongly influenced by limited direct empirical evidence, particularly Khan et al. (2025). Additional studies across different frontier economies,

industries, and institutional contexts are needed to test the generalizability of the proposed mechanism.

Sixth, the review mainly focuses on firm-level capabilities, while broader factors including export policies, trade agreements, geopolitical conditions, exchange rate volatility, supply chain restructuring, and digital infrastructure may also influence international competitiveness.

Finally, rapid technological, geopolitical, and regulatory changes may reshape international competition and exporter capabilities. Future research should therefore use comparative, longitudinal, mixed method, and quantitative approaches to better understand how frontier emerging market exporters develop adaptive strategies and sustain competitiveness in advanced economies.

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