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Direct Export Strategies, Regulatory Framework, and Competitive Advantage in Fresh Produce Exporting Firms: An Integrative Review and Research Agenda

Direct Export Strategies, Regulatory Framework, and Competitive Advantage in Fresh Produce Exporting Firms: An Integrative Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract
Direct export strategies are widely promoted as a pathway to superior competitive performance for agribusiness firms in emerging markets, yet the conditions under which they succeed remain poorly integrated across the strategic management, international business, and institutional literatures. This article synthesises theoretical and empirical scholarship on direct sales, e-commerce, and strategic partnerships as drivers of competitive advantage among fresh produce exporting firms, and examines regulatory framework as the institutional mechanism moderating this relationship. The study adopts an integrative literature review approach. It integrates four theoretical traditions: the Resource-Based View (anchor theory), the Uppsala Internationalisation Model, Institutional Theory, and Porter's Diamond Model of National Competitive Advantage. It also synthesises 21 empirical studies spanning Asian, European, and African contexts, including Kenya. The reviewed literature demonstrates consistent, though theoretically fragmented, support for a positive association between direct export strategies and competitive advantage. However, fewer than one-fifth of the 21 studies are explicitly grounded in a named theory, and none integrates firm-level, process-level, institutional, and national-competitiveness perspectives simultaneously. The evidence is dominated by quantitative, cross-sectional designs and is concentrated outside agriculture. Only four of the 21 studies are Kenyan. None examines fresh produce exporters using the full construct set of direct export strategy, regulatory framework, and competitive advantage. A recurring tension is whether regulatory stringency constrains direct exporting or triggers firms to internalise control through direct channels. The review advances an integrated, multi-level theoretical framework spanning firm resources, internationalisation process, institutional legitimacy, and national-competitiveness conditions. It also proposes a moderated conceptual model in which regulatory framework strengthens or weakens the effects of direct sales, e-commerce, and strategic partnerships on competitive advantage. It offers testable propositions, a research agenda, and implications for exporters, industry bodies, and regulators in Kenya's horticultural sector.

Introduction

Fresh produce exporting is among the most institutionally demanding segments of international agribusiness. Firms must simultaneously manage perishability, coordinate complex cold-chain logistics, and satisfy overlapping layers of domestic and destination-market regulation. These range from phytosanitary certification to maximum residue limits and private buyer standards such as GlobalGAP (Fulano et al., 2021; FPEAK, 2025). Within this environment, firms choose how to reach foreign buyers: by selling directly, trading through digital platforms, or partnering with local intermediaries. This strategic choice is widely held to shape competitive performance (Jeannet et al., 2021; Cassia & Magno, 2022). Yet the literature linking these direct export strategies to competitive advantage remains scattered across disconnected disciplinary silos. Strategic management studies emphasise firm-level resources. International business studies emphasise incremental market commitment. Institutional scholarship emphasises regulatory legitimacy. National-competitiveness scholarship emphasises macro-level structural conditions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Wernerfelt, 1984; Porter, 1990; Barney, 1991; Johanson & Vahlne, 2015). Few studies bring these perspectives together, and fewer still examine how the regulatory framework conditions the strategy–performance relationship, rather than simply accompanying it.

This fragmentation is particularly consequential for Kenya's horticultural export sector, which is of substantial economic importance and operates under some of the most demanding regulatory regimes in global trade. These regimes span Kenyan institutions such as the Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service (KEPHIS) and the Horticultural Crops Directorate. They also include destination-market regimes in the European Union, China, and the United States, which differ markedly in stringency and enforcement mechanism (Fulano et al., 2021; Wafula & Waweru, 2022; KEPHIS, 2025; USDA, 2025). Whether direct export strategies translate into measurable competitive gains in operational efficiency, export revenue, market expansion, and product quality may depend substantially on how coherently these regulatory layers align with firm strategy. Yet this moderating relationship has not been systematically synthesised in the existing literature.

This article addresses that gap through an integrative review of the theoretical and empirical literature on direct sales, e-commerce, and strategic partnerships as strategic drivers of competitive advantage, and the moderating role of regulatory framework. The review makes four contributions. First, it develops an integrated, multi-level theoretical framework that combines the Resource-Based View, the Uppsala Internationalisation Model, Institutional Theory, and Porter's Diamond Model. Each theory operates at a distinct level of analysis – firm resources, internationalisation process, institutional legitimacy, and national competitive context. Their combination yields a more complete account of export performance than any single-theory in isolation. Second, it synthesises 21 empirical studies thematically and critically, surfacing convergent findings, unresolved tensions, and methodological patterns across Asian, European, and African contexts. Third, it distils these patterns into an explicit, evidence-grounded research agenda. Fourth, it proposes a moderated conceptual model, accompanied by formal research propositions, to guide future empirical testing.

Review Methodology

This review adopts an integrative literature review approach, distinct from a systematic review with meta-analytic pooling. Integrative reviews are the method of choice when a research domain is theoretically fragmented and the objective is synthesis, critique, and reconceptualisation rather than the quantitative aggregation of standardised effect sizes (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Snyder, 2019). The direct export strategy literature spans strategic management, international business, institutional economics, and agricultural trade policy. These strands also use heterogeneous

constructs, measures, and designs. An integrative approach is therefore the appropriate choice for the interdisciplinary, theory-generating synthesis undertaken here.

The review scope was bounded by four keyword clusters. They were (i) direct export strategy, direct sales, e-commerce exporting, and strategic partnerships/joint ventures; (ii) competitive advantage and its firm-level indicators (operational efficiency, export revenue, market expansion, product quality); (iii) regulatory framework, institutional pressure, and export compliance; and (iv) the four theoretical traditions synthesised in this review. Foundational theoretical works were retained irrespective of publication date (e.g., Johanson & Vahlne, 1977/2015; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Wernerfelt, 1984; Porter, 1990), reflecting their status as originating sources. Empirical literature was prioritised from the 2015–2026 period to capture the recent expansion of export strategy scholarship. This was supplemented by Kenyan regulatory and institutional documentation (Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service, Horticultural Crops Directorate, Fresh Produce Exporters Association of Kenya, Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis, and United States Department of Agriculture). This documentation contextualises the regulatory framework construct.

The resulting corpus comprises 21 distinct empirical studies together with the four theoretical traditions noted above. Geographically, four studies (19 %) are situated in Kenya, seven (33 %) in other Asian markets (India, Pakistan, China, Egypt, Indonesia), five (24 %) in Europe (Ukraine, Norway, Italy, Spain), and five (24 %) are global, multi-country, or context-unspecified. Notably, none of the four Kenyan studies examines fresh produce or horticultural exporters specifically using the full construct set of direct export strategy, regulatory framework, and competitive advantage. They nonetheless contribute to this review in three ways. Cheruiyot et al. (2024) supply Kenyan evidence on the export environment among horticultural farmers. Oyombe et al. (2022) and Kasalai et al. (2024) supply Kenyan evidence on partnership and competitive advantage. Mugo and Macharia (2021) supply Kenyan evidence on regulation and competitive advantage. As with the corpus profile reported in comparable integrative reviews, this distribution is reported descriptively, as a property of the corpus assembled for synthesis, rather than as a count derived from a registered systematic search protocol.

Analysis proceeded in three stages consistent with integrative review practice (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The first stage was data reduction, in which each study was coded by theme (direct sales, e-commerce, strategic partnership, or regulatory framework/moderation), geographic context, methodological design, and theoretical grounding. The second was data display and comparison, in which coded studies were grouped into comparative evidence tables to enable pattern identification across contexts and methods. The third was synthesis and verification, in which convergent findings, tensions, and gaps were drawn out analytically and cross-checked against the original studies to avoid overstatement.

Theoretical Foundations: Towards an Integrated Multi-Level Framework

Four theoretical traditions underpin this review, each operating at a distinct level of analysis. The Resource-Based View (RBV) explains firm-level resource heterogeneity. The Uppsala Internationalisation Model explains the temporal process of market commitment. Institutional Theory explains the meso-level legitimacy pressures exerted by regulation. Porter's Diamond Model explains the macro-level national conditions within which firms compete. The subsections below synthesise each theory's core logic and principal critiques; the final subsection integrates them into a single nested explanatory framework.

Resource-Based View (Anchor Theory)

The Resource-Based View, pioneered by Wernerfelt (1984) and refined by Barney (1991), holds that sustainable competitive advantage arises from a firm's possession and deployment of internal resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). The framework was later extended to VRIO (valuable, rare, inimitable, and organised) by adding the requirement that a firm be organised to capture the value these resources create. The theory rests on two core assumptions: that firms within an industry are heterogeneous in their resource endowments, and that these resources are imperfectly mobile across firms (Barney, 1991). Applied to fresh produce exporting, RBV explains why firms with superior international marketing expertise, digital integration, logistics coordination, traceability systems, and buyer relationships are better positioned to implement direct export strategies successfully. Such firms are also better placed to sustain competitive performance even within a shared regulatory and market environment (Gibbon & Ponte, 2008; Njonjo et al., 2021).

RBV has attracted sustained criticism on two grounds. The first is tautological reasoning: resources are labelled "valuable" because they generate advantage, while advantage is explained by the possession of "valuable" resources. The second is its comparatively static, inward-looking orientation, which pays limited attention to how firms renew capabilities over time or respond to external institutional and market forces (Njonjo et al., 2021). This inward-looking limitation is precisely what Institutional Theory and Porter's Diamond Model help to address. RBV nonetheless serves as this review's anchor theory because it provides the primary firm-level explanatory lens linking direct export strategies to competitive advantage. It also accommodates the moderating influence of regulatory framework as an external condition acting upon, rather than replacing, firm resources.

Uppsala Internationalisation Model

The Uppsala model, developed by Johanson and Vahlne in the 1970s and subsequently revised (Johanson & Vahlne, 2015), conceptualises internationalisation as a gradual, experientially driven process. It comprises state aspects (market knowledge and market commitment) and change aspects (commitment decisions and current activities) that reinforce one another over time. The model's psychic-distance principle holds that firms enter markets that are cognitively and institutionally closer before venturing further afield, reducing uncertainty as experiential knowledge accumulates. The model assumes that the principal barrier to internationalisation is a deficiency of largely tacit market knowledge, acquired through operational experience rather than abstract study. It also assumes that firms are fundamentally risk-averse, seeking growth while minimising uncertainty (Johanson & Vahlne, 2015).

The model has been criticised on two grounds. It is seen as deterministic, since "born global" firms internationalise rapidly without progressing through its sequential stages (Jyly, 2021). It is also seen as static and circular – knowledge generates commitment, which generates further knowledge – which limits its capacity to explain the proactive, non-sequential strategies observable in a hyper-connected global economy (Kitsos, 2022). Despite these limitations, the model remains analytically useful for fresh produce exporters. Adopting direct exporting represents a substantial escalation of market commitment that depends on accumulated experience with complex international supply chains, foreign retailer quality requirements, and the logistics of perishable goods (Johanson & Vahlne, 2015). Critically, Hudson and Richardson (2024) extend psychic-distance to the institutional environment, not merely culture and language. For a Kenyan exporter, the "distance" to be overcome therefore includes food safety law, customs procedure, and certification regimes. This extension is what links the Uppsala model directly to the regulatory framework construct: the pace at which a firm

accumulates experiential knowledge of, and commitment to, direct exporting is shaped by how navigable the surrounding regulatory terrain is.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory, introduced by Meyer and Rowan (1977), holds that organisations are shaped not only by efficiency and profit imperatives. They must also conform to the formal rules and informal norms of their institutional environment in order to secure legitimacy (Kauppi, 2022). Organisations often adopt widely accepted practices – "rationalised myths" in Meyer and Rowan's (1977) terms – not because such practices improve performance but because they confer credibility; DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 149) term the resulting convergence "isomorphism". Ruef and Scott (1998) identify three channels through which institutional pressure operates: coercive mechanisms tied to law and regulation, normative mechanisms rooted in professional and industry standards, and mimetic mechanisms that arise under uncertainty, as firms imitate the practices of others.

Critics make two main points. The first is that the theory overstates conformity at the expense of strategic agency: firms sometimes bend, resist, or strategically exploit institutional pressures rather than simply submit to them (Badham & Santiago, 2023). The second is that it explains little about why performance differs among firms under similar institutional conditions, because its emphasis on isomorphism assumes that outcomes are alike. It has also been described as relatively static, understating how inconsistently regulatory regimes are enforced in developing economies. For Kenyan fresh produce exporters, institutional pressures operate at two levels. At the domestic level, they work through national export laws, KEPHIS and HCD requirements, and industry-association norms (Muthoka & Ogutu, 2015). At the international level, each destination-market imposes its own regulatory and cultural expectations (Ajwang, 2020). In this review, Institutional Theory explains the moderating variable of regulatory framework: coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures legitimise and constrain the strategic choices firms make, shaping whether a given direct export strategy translates into competitive performance.

Porter's Diamond Model of National Competitive Advantage

Porter's (1990) Diamond Model explains why particular industries within particular nations achieve sustained international competitiveness, locating the unit of analysis not in the individual firm but in the broader national environment (Godpower et al., 2022). The model identifies four interacting determinants – factor conditions, demand conditions, related and supporting industries, and firm strategy, structure, and rivalry – later supplemented by government and chance events (Bankova & Tsvetanova, 2024; Afshar & Shah, 2025). Applied to Kenyan horticulture, factor conditions include fertile soil, favourable climate, and growing agricultural expertise (Bokelmann et al., 2022). Demand conditions include the exacting standards of international supermarket buyers. Related and supporting industries include cold-chain, trucking, and port infrastructure. Lastly, firm strategy, structure, and rivalry shape how agribusinesses organise, innovate, and compete domestically before facing international markets.

The model is criticised for its national/industry-level focus, which downplays the firm-level managerial choices that determine which firms succeed and which do not within a shared national diamond (Yetton et al., 1992). This is the gap that RBV, at the firm-level, is positioned to fill. In this review, the Diamond Model is not treated as a self-contained explanation but as one lens among several. It explains why Kenyan fresh produce exporters have competed internationally. It also explains why that competitiveness can erode when national infrastructure falters or regulatory barriers rise, regardless of how strong an individual firm's export strategy may be. The Diamond Model thus supports the dependent variable of competitive advantage by supplying the national-level conditions within which firm-level strategy and institutional legitimacy jointly operate.

Theoretical Integration and Synthesis

Read together, these four theories form a nested, multi-level explanatory architecture rather than four competing accounts of the same phenomenon. The theories connect rather than compete. The Uppsala process puts the resources identified by RBV to use over time, and institutional knowledge is part of the experience that firms accumulate along the way. Institutional Theory sets the legitimacy conditions under which that process unfolds. Porter's Diamond Model sets the national conditions that bound what any firm, however well resourced, can achieve. This review's central theoretical contribution is to render this nesting explicit. The empirical synthesis in this article demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of prior studies, at most, apply one of these theories in isolation, typically RBV or an institutional framing. No identified study combines firm resources, internationalisation process, institutional legitimacy, and national competitive context within a single model of export strategy and performance. This integration is formalised in the conceptual framework presented later in this article.

Conceptualising the Study's Core Constructs

Direct export strategy is most consistently defined across the literature as a market-entry approach. The exporting firm sells directly to foreign buyers without relying on intermediaries, thereby retaining control over pricing, distribution, and customer relationships (Pakhucha et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2024). This review, consistent with Kenyan horticultural export practice, treats direct export strategy as encompassing three distinct modes. These are direct sales through company-owned or exclusive foreign representation, e-commerce through digital platforms, and strategic partnerships through joint ventures with local market actors. Table 1 summarises the definitional convergence across the study's core constructs.

Table 1: Definitional convergence across the study's core constructs

Construct	Core Definitional Elements	Representative Sources
Direct Export Strategy	Market-entry without intermediaries; the exporter establishes and controls distribution, documentation, and buyer relationships directly. Encompasses direct sales, e-commerce, and strategic partnerships.	Pakhucha et al. (2021); Ahmad et al. (2024); Elango & Pangarkar (2021)
Regulatory Framework (moderator)	Local and international rules, standards, and certification regimes (KEPHIS, HCD, GlobalGAP; EU/China/US import requirements) that legitimise and constrain export strategy through coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures.	Kauppi (2022); Njonjo et al. (2022); Fulano et al. (2021)
Competitive Advantage	A firm's capacity to create superior economic value relative to rivals, evidenced by operational efficiency, export revenue growth, market expansion, and product quality.	Porter (1985); Barney (1991); Maritan & Peteraf (2016)

Direct Export Strategy

Direct export strategy is the umbrella construct of this review. It takes three forms as discussed below: direct sales, e-commerce, and strategic partnerships.

Direct Sales Strategy

Direct sales entail a firm establishing its own sales presence in a foreign market. This is done through company-owned subsidiaries or exclusive representatives, rather than relying on local partners (Jeannet et al., 2021). The principal advantage is control – over brand representation, pricing, and customer data. This reduces the risk of intermediary self-interest and protects firm-specific strengths

where intellectual property or brand reputation is sensitive (Jeannet et al., 2021). The principal constraint is cost: establishing a direct sales operation abroad is resource-intensive. As a consequence, it is pursued more readily by firms with prior international experience or by those selling complex, high-value products (Hansen & Drecker, 2023). This constraint has particular relevance for smaller Kenyan exporters.

E-commerce Strategy

The diffusion of digital platforms has made e-commerce a viable alternative market-entry route. This allows firms to reach foreign buyers directly without the capital outlay of physical market presence (Cassia & Magno, 2022). This substantially lowers entry barriers for SMEs (Sun, 2021). It also shifts the burden of trust, payment security, and data protection onto the exporter (Scarpi et al., 2022). It also requires firms to internalise or contract out shipping, customs, returns, and after-sales logistics that would otherwise be handled by a local partner (Cassia & Magno, 2022).

Strategic Partnerships

Strategic partnerships and joint ventures involve an exporter contributing product or technology. A local partner contributes market knowledge, networks, and distribution access. This arrangement is particularly effective in markets characterised by unfamiliar regulation or cultural distance. Shared ownership reduces financial risk and accelerates market learning, but introduces the risk of divergent objectives, cultural friction, and knowledge leakage. It requires the exporter to cede a degree of strategic and operational control. The effectiveness of such arrangements depends heavily on partner trustworthiness and the firm's own alliance-management capability – itself a resource in the RBV sense.

Regulatory Framework

Regulatory framework, the moderating variable in this review, has two parts. The first is the domestic institutional architecture governing Kenyan exporters – phytosanitary and conformity certification from KEPHIS, export licensing from the Horticultural Crops Directorate, and voluntary buyer-driven standards such as GlobalGAP (Fulano et al., 2021; Amare et al., 2024). The second is the destination-market regimes, which vary markedly in stringency and enforcement mechanism. European Union requirements are among the most exacting globally, mandating phytosanitary certificates, maximum residue limit compliance, and marketing standards. These are often layered with private buyer requirements such as GlobalGAP and HACCP (Fulano et al., 2021; FPEAK, 2025). China imposes pre-export facility audits in addition to residue and quarantine requirements (Wafula & Waweru, 2022). The United States relies more on buyer-expected certification, Country of Origin Labelling, and Foreign Supplier Verification Programme documentation than on mandatory pre-clearance (KEPHIS, 2025; USDA, 2025). This asymmetry across destination markets is itself analytically significant. It implies that regulatory framework is not a single, uniform moderating condition but a multi-jurisdictional one whose stringency varies by export destination.

Competitive Advantage

Competitive advantage is most commonly defined as a firm's capacity to create greater economic value for buyers, relative to cost, than its rivals (Porter, 1985; Maritan & Peteraf, 2016). It is achieved through a value-creating strategy that is not simultaneously pursued by any current or potential competitor (Barney, 1991). This review operationalises competitive advantage through four indicators, consistently identified in the fresh produce export literature: operational efficiency, export revenue, market expansion, and product quality.

Operational Efficiency

Operational efficiency denotes the maximisation of output relative to time, capital, and labour inputs across production, logistics, and supply-chain processes (Adeniran et al., 2024). It is especially consequential for perishable fresh produce, where inefficiency converts directly into spoilage and financial loss (Haque et al., 2025). In this review, operational efficiency is read as the extent to which a direct export strategy reduces time, cost, and loss between the farm and the buyer.

Export Revenue

Export revenue, the direct monetary return from foreign sales, signals both market acceptance and the financial capacity to reinvest in technology, marketing, and product development (Keskin et al., 2021). In this review, export revenue is read as the extent to which direct sales, e-commerce, and partnerships turn market access into sales income.

Market Expansion

Market expansion, the strategic penetration of new geographic markets, generates economies of scale, diversifies risk away from any single market, and constitutes a valuable, path-dependent resource in its own right (Lubis & Muniapan, 2024). In this review, market expansion is read as the extent to which a direct export strategy reaches buyers and destinations beyond those the firm already serves.

Product Quality

Product quality – encompassing phytosanitary compliance, grading and packaging consistency, traceability, and certification – shapes buyer confidence and repeat purchase behaviour. It is itself contingent on operational efficiency, cold-chain integrity, and value-chain coordination (Amare et al., 2024). In this review, product quality is read as the extent to which a firm meets the quality and compliance requirements set by buyers and regulators, which links this indicator directly to the regulatory framework.

Empirical Synthesis and Critical Analysis

This section synthesises the 21 empirical studies reviewed, organised around the study's three strategy themes and the regulatory-moderation theme. Each subsection presents a comparative evidence table followed by an analytical synthesis identifying convergent findings, unresolved tensions, and context-specific gaps, rather than a sequential study-by-study narrative.

Direct Sales Strategy and Competitive Advantage

Table 2 Summarises the studies reviewed on direct sales strategy and their key findings.

Table 2: Direct sales strategy and competitive advantage – comparative evidence

Study (Context)	Method	Key Finding
Thakur et al. (2023) – India	Survey, 400 farmers; descriptive statistics, Acharya approach, multinomial logistic regression	Direct-to-consumer channels outperformed intermediary-based marketing on marketing performance.
Ahmad et al. (2024) – Pakistan–BRICS trade	Secondary trade data; Balassa RCA and Export-Import Intensity indices	Comparative advantage grew sharply with China, rose modestly with Brazil/Russia/South Africa, and declined with India.
Tyukhtenko et al. (2024) – Ukraine/EU, 15 firms	Wilcoxon test, scoring techniques	Competitiveness is shaped by resource access, technology, and state support; integrated entry strategies improve performance despite logistics constraints.
Hansen & Drecker (2023) – Norway (Drytech, single case)	Qualitative case study; semi-structured interviews, observation	Direct-to-retailer strategy yields higher margins but is resource-intensive; distributor-based entry is faster but cedes control and margin.
Singh et al. (2024) – 227 SMEs, sustainability sectors	Quantitative, structural equation modelling	Institutional support drives green export readiness and innovation, which mediate the link to green export strategy and performance.
Elango & Pangarkar (2021) – 23,256 firms, 32 emerging markets	Heckman two-stage econometric model	Firms favour direct exporting under high institutional harshness and low uncertainty avoidance; the latter moderates the former.
Luis & Aubert (2023) – farm-level, context-unspecified	Quantitative; regression analysis	Direct sales are associated with higher output and on-farm processing integration.
Mehrabi & Giagnocavo (2024) – conceptual/global	Integrative literature review; abductive coding	Sustainable, innovative business models enable firms to internalise externalities in agri-food value chains.
Cheruiyot et al. (2024) – Kenya (South Rift)	Survey, 334 smallholder horticultural farmers	Export environment (regulation, certification, trade agreements) has the strongest association with market standards and export growth.

This stream converges on control as the central mechanism linking direct sales to performance. Firms that sell directly capture higher margins and closer buyer relationships (Hansen & Drecker, 2023; Thakur et al., 2023). This is consistent with RBV's emphasis on capturing value from firm-specific capabilities. Elango and Pangarkar (2021) find that firms are more likely to choose direct exporting where institutional harshness is high. This complicates any simple assumption that harsh regulation discourages direct-control. It suggests, instead, that firms may use direct exporting as a strategic response to a difficult institutional environment, internalising compliance rather than delegating it to intermediaries who might mismanage it. This raises an important boundary condition for this review's own moderation proposition (set out in the conceptual framework below). Regulatory framework may not moderate the strategy–performance relationship in a uniformly linear fashion. Its influence may itself be entangled with the strategic choice of export-mode. A further pattern is one of analytical level. The two RCA-based studies (Ahmad et al., 2021, 2024) operate at the national commodity level and, by design, cannot speak to firm-level strategic choice or firm–regulation interaction. This is the

level at which this review, and Cheruiyot et al.'s (2024) Kenyan evidence, are positioned. Notably, none of the studies in this stream examines fresh produce exporters using direct sales, regulatory framework, and competitive advantage jointly.

E-commerce Strategy and Competitive Advantage

Table 3 summarises the studies reviewed on e-commerce strategy and their key findings.

Table 3: E-commerce strategy and competitive advantage – comparative evidence

Study (Context)	Method	Key Finding
Chen & Zhang (2015) – China (Beijing), 366 SMEs	Longitudinal econometrics: ADF, VAR(2), Granger causality, Johansen co-integration	IT investment (a technical factor) exerts the strongest, most persistent positive effect on e-commerce sales growth.
Cassia & Magno (2022) – Italy, food exporters	Partial least squares structural equation modelling	Cross-border e-commerce adoption is associated with improved financial performance.
Hamad et al. (2018) – Egypt, 768 manufacturing SMEs	SEM with bootstrapping (WarpPLS); Technology-Organisation-Environment (TOE) framework	Relative advantage and competitive pressure consistently drive all four levels of B2B e-commerce adoption; every adoption level positively affects at least one competitive-advantage dimension.
Qi et al. (2024) – China (Guangdong)	Secondary data; grey correlation screening (λ = 0.75)	Synergy between cross-border e-commerce and logistics is low, driven by trust deficits and information asymmetry; firm size matters more than infrastructure quality in the short run.

The e-commerce stream converges on a generally positive relationship with performance (Chen & Zhang, 2015; Hamad et al., 2018; Cassia & Magno, 2022). However, Qi et al.'s (2024) finding of low e-commerce–logistics synergy introduces an important qualification. Digital market access alone does not guarantee competitive gain unless it is matched by trust-building mechanisms and logistics readiness. For Kenyan fresh produce exporters, whose products are perishable and whose export documentation (phytosanitary certificates, MRL compliance) must physically accompany shipments, this qualification is especially salient. It implies that e-commerce's competitive benefit may be conditional on the same regulatory and logistical infrastructure that direct sales and partnership strategies depend on. It is not an independent digital shortcut around that infrastructure. All four studies in this stream are drawn from Asia and Europe. None examines e-commerce adoption among African or Kenyan agricultural exporters. Trust, payment infrastructure, and cross-border logistics present materially different challenges there than in manufacturing or general-merchandise e-commerce.

Strategic Partnerships ***and Competitive Advantage***

Table 4 summarises the studies reviewed on strategic partnerships and their key findings.

Table 4: Strategic partnerships and competitive advantage – comparative evidence

Study (Context)	Method	Key Finding
Idris & Primiana (2015) – Indonesian small industries	Conceptual review; secondary data, narrative analysis	Partnership strategies (resource pooling, alliance creation, learning) positively and mutually reinforce competitive advantage.
Kasalai et al. (2024) – Kenya (Nairobi DT SACCOs), 230 managers	Descriptive survey; descriptive and inferential statistics	Strategic partnership shows a strong positive correlation with sustainable competitive advantage.
Oyombe et al. (2022) – Kenya (Nairobi construction supply-chain)	Survey; SPSS descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, hierarchical regression	Strategic partnership exerts a significant, positive direct effect on competitive advantage.
Mardatillah et al. (2019) – multi-source (Scopus/ProQuest)	Narrative thematic coding of secondary industry reports	Partner attributes, communication behaviour, and conflict-resolution technique determine whether alliances convert into lasting competitive advantage.

This is the most consistent stream in the corpus. A positive partnership–advantage relationship holds across remarkably divergent sectors and contexts. Evidence from Indonesian manufacturing, Kenyan savings and credit cooperatives, and Kenyan construction supply chains (Idris & Primiana, 2015; Oyombe et al., 2022; Kasalai et al., 2024) suggests the relationship is reasonably robust in direction, if not in magnitude. Mardatillah et al. (2019) add an important mechanism-level insight. Partnership effectiveness is not automatic but depends on the exporting firm's own alliance-management capability: specific communication and conflict-resolution competence that is a potentially inimitable resource in RBV terms. This illustrates this review's theoretical integration argument. A construct framed here as an external strategic choice (partnership) is, on closer analysis, partly explained by an internal firm capability. Despite this consistency, none of the four studies examines strategic partnerships in agricultural exporting specifically. Two of the three most closely related contexts (SACCOs, construction) share little of fresh produce exporting's perishability and regulatory intensity. It therefore remains open whether the same partnership mechanisms operate as strongly under time-sensitive, compliance-heavy conditions.

Regulatory Framework as Moderator: Direct Evidence

Table 5 summarises the direct evidence reviewed on regulatory framework and competitive advantage.

Table 5: Regulatory framework and competitive advantage – comparative evidence

Study (Context)	Method	Key Finding
Vélez et al. (2024) – Spain, 193 exporting SMEs	Quantitative statistical modelling of governance mechanisms	Mutual trust is a critical, inimitable resource driving competitive advantage and export performance; output controls enhance trust, which mediates performance gains.
Bertheussen (2021) – Norway (Pelagic value-chain)	Comparative industry analysis (fish harvesting vs processing)	Harvesters achieved roughly double the return on assets, 8× higher cash-flow margins, and ~70% greater growth than processors, attributed to institutional advantages (regulation, collective bargaining power, entry barriers).
Mugo & Macharia (2021) – Kenya (telecommunications), 247 managers	Descriptive survey; factor analysis, ANOVA, multiple regression	Government laws and regulations have a statistically significant positive effect on competitive advantage ($\beta = 0.273$).

This stream provides the strongest direct evidence that regulatory and institutional conditions are not peripheral controls but primary performance determinants. Bertheussen (2021) shows performance differentials of striking magnitude between two sub-sectors of the same national value-chain, attributable substantially to institutional and regulatory asymmetry rather than firm strategy alone. Mugo and Macharia (2021) provide Kenyan quantitative confirmation of a positive regulatory effect, albeit in telecommunications rather than agriculture. Vélez et al. (2024) contribute a complementary, RBV-consistent mechanism: governance structures build trust, an inimitable relational resource, through which regulatory and contractual controls translate into performance. Elango and Pangarkar (2021) found that firms select direct exporting under conditions of institutional harshness (see the evidence on direct sales above). Read against that finding, this stream leaves a genuine, unresolved empirical question that this review's own study is positioned to address. Does regulatory framework in Kenyan fresh produce exporting function as a performance-enhancing moderator that rewards firms already pursuing direct strategies? Or does it act as a selection pressure that shapes which export strategy firms choose in the first place? No study in the corpus disentangles these two possibilities within a single model, and none does so in agriculture.

Cross-Cutting Patterns: Geography, Method, and Theory

Three cross-cutting patterns emerge across the full 21-study corpus. First, geographic coverage is asymmetric. Kenyan evidence exists (Mugo & Macharia, 2021; Oyombe et al., 2022; Cheruiyot et al., 2024; Kasalai et al., 2024) but is dispersed across cooperatives, construction, and telecommunications rather than concentrated in fresh produce exporting. The studies most directly relevant to export strategy theory (Chen & Zhang, 2015; Elango & Pangarkar, 2021; Vélez et al., 2024) are drawn from China, large emerging-market samples, and Spain, respectively.

Second, the corpus is methodologically skewed toward quantitative, cross-sectional designs, which account for roughly three-quarters of the 21 studies. Qualitative case studies (Mardatillah et al., 2019; Hansen & Drecker, 2023) and purely conceptual reviews (Idris & Primiana, 2015; Mehrabi & Giagnocavo, 2024) comprise the remainder. No study in the corpus combines primary quantitative testing with longitudinal tracking of firm performance following a strategic export-mode change. Third, theoretical grounding is the exception. Only four of the 21 studies (Hamad et al., 2018; Bertheussen, 2021; Elango & Pangarkar, 2021; Vélez et al., 2024) explicitly anchor their analysis in a named theoretical framework – institutional theory, the Technology-Organisation-Environment

framework, or governance/resource-based reasoning. No identified study integrates firm-resource, process, institutional, and national-competitiveness perspectives within a single model. These three patterns – dispersed rather than concentrated Kenyan evidence, methodological homogeneity, and theoretical fragmentation – jointly motivate the research agenda synthesised in the next section.

Taken together, the Kenyan studies offer three insights for this review. Government laws and regulations have a significant positive effect on competitive advantage (Mugo & Macharia, 2021). Strategic partnership is positively associated with competitive advantage among Kenyan organisations (Kasalai et al., 2024; Oyombe et al., 2022). The export environment, including regulation and certification, is strongly associated with market standards and export growth among Kenyan horticultural farmers (Cheruiyot et al., 2024).

Synthesised Research Gaps and Agenda

Table 6 consolidates the gaps identified across the empirical synthesis into a thematic research agenda.

Table 6: Synthesised research gaps and agenda

Theme	Dominant Pattern in Extant Literature	Persistent Gap	Proposed Research Direction
Direct Sales Strategy	Direct sales raise margins and buyer control, but institutional harshness may itself drive firms toward direct exporting (Elango & Pangarkar, 2021; Thakur et al., 2023).	No Kenyan study tests direct sales, regulatory framework, and competitive advantage jointly among fresh produce exporters; macro-level RCA studies cannot speak to firm strategy (Ahmad et al., 2021, 2024).	Test direct sales as a strategic driver of competitive advantage, with regulatory framework modelled explicitly as a moderator rather than a background control.
E-commerce Strategy	E-commerce adoption is generally associated with improved performance, but its benefit is conditional on trust and logistics readiness (Hamad et al., 2018; Qi et al., 2024).	No study examines e-commerce adoption among African or Kenyan agricultural exporters, where perishability and physical certification requirements complicate purely digital market-entry.	Examine e-commerce strategy's effect on competitive advantage under Kenya's regulatory and cold-chain logistics constraints.
Strategic Partnerships	Partnership–advantage relationships are consistently positive across divergent sectors, contingent on alliance-management capability (Mardatillah et al., 2019; Oyombe et al., 2022; Kasalai et al., 2024).	No study examines strategic partnerships in agricultural or fresh produce exporting specifically, where perishability and compliance intensity may alter partnership dynamics.	Extend partnership-strategy analysis to fresh produce exporters, testing alliance-management capability as a boundary condition.
Regulatory Framework (moderation)	Regulatory/institutional conditions are strong direct performance determinants (Bertheussen, 2021; Mugo & Macharia, 2021), yet may also endogenously shape strategy choice (Elango & Pangarkar, 2021).	No study disentangles regulatory framework's moderating effect on strategy–performance from its potential role in selecting which strategy firms adopt in the first place.	Model regulatory framework explicitly as a moderator of the strategy–competitive advantage relationship, while controlling for its influence on strategy choice.

Theme	Dominant Pattern in Extant Literature	Persistent Gap	Proposed Research Direction
Theory & Method (cross-cutting)	RBV, Uppsala, Institutional Theory, and Porter's Diamond have each been applied separately to fragments of export behaviour.	No identified study integrates all four theoretical lenses; only four of 21 studies name any theory; the field is dominated by cross-sectional, single-country quantitative designs.	Adopt an integrated multi-theory framework tested with primary, firm-level data from Kenyan fresh produce exporters.

Integrated Conceptual Framework

Building on the theoretical integration developed above and the empirical gaps identified in the research agenda, this review proposes a conceptual model in which direct sales, e-commerce, and strategic partnerships act as strategic drivers of competitive advantage. Regulatory framework moderates each relationship (Figure 1). Two bodies of theory support this expectation: the Uppsala model's psychic-distance logic, extended to institutional distance (Hudson & Richardson, 2024), and Institutional Theory's account of coercive, normative, and mimetic pressure (Ruef & Scott, 1998). Both suggest that effective and coherent regulatory alignment should strengthen the translation of direct export strategies into competitive advantage. Alignment does so in three ways: by reducing compliance uncertainty, by legitimising firm practices to international buyers, and by lowering the transaction costs of market-entry. Conversely, fragmented, inconsistently enforced, or excessively burdensome regulation is theorised to attenuate this translation. The evidence reviewed above also warns that the relationship between regulatory stringency and strategy choice may be more entangled than a simple attenuating moderator implies. This review treats that complication as an explicit avenue for empirical testing rather than a settled assumption.

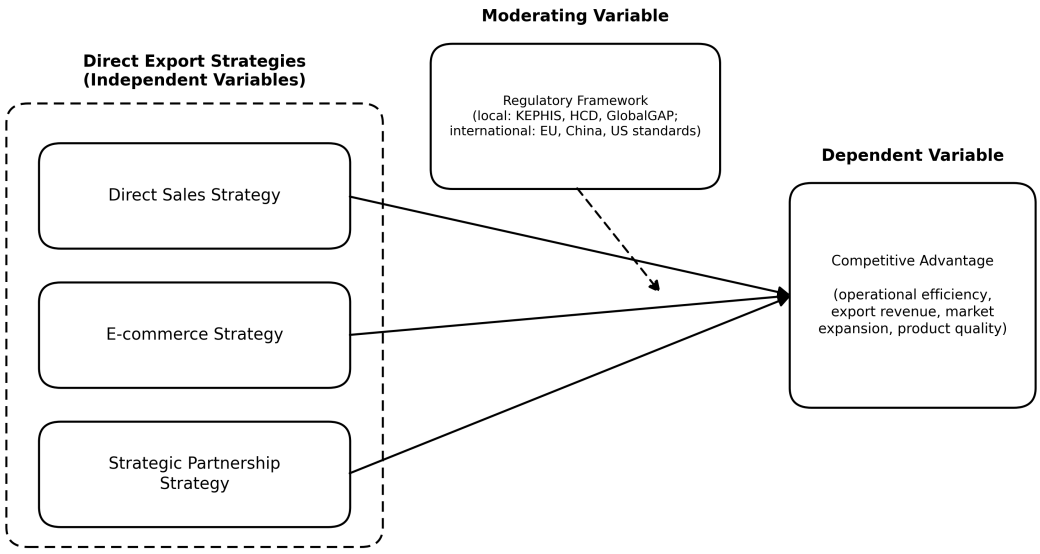


Figure 1: Integrated conceptual framework of direct export strategies, regulatory framework, and competitive advantage

Research Propositions

Consistent with the theoretical and empirical synthesis above, the following propositions are advanced for future empirical testing:

P1: Direct sales strategy is positively associated with competitive advantage among fresh produce exporting firms.

P2: E-commerce strategy is positively associated with competitive advantage among fresh produce exporting firms.

P3: Strategic partnerships are positively associated with competitive advantage among fresh produce exporting firms.

P4: Regulatory framework positively moderates the relationships between direct export strategies (direct sales, e-commerce, strategic partnerships) and competitive advantage, such that these relationships are stronger under conditions of coherent, well-enforced regulatory alignment than under weak or fragmented regulatory conditions.

P5 (rival explanation, for exploratory testing): Regulatory stringency is not only a moderator of the strategy–advantage relationship but may also influence which direct export strategy firms select in the first place. Specifically, firms facing more stringent regulatory environments are more likely to adopt direct-control strategies (direct sales, wholly owned e-commerce) over strategies that cede control to intermediaries (strategic partnerships).

Discussion: Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

This section discusses what the review means for theory, for exporters, and for regulators and industry bodies in Kenya. It begins with the theoretical implications, then turns to the practical and managerial implications, and ends with the policy implications.

Theoretical Implications

This review's principal theoretical contribution is the explicit nesting of firm-resource (RBV), process (Uppsala), institutional (regulatory legitimacy), and national-competitiveness (Diamond Model) perspectives into a single multi-level account of export strategy and performance. This integration directly addresses a weakness surfaced throughout the empirical synthesis: single-theory applications capture only a fragment of the phenomenon. RBV-only studies underspecify how institutional context shapes which resources matter. Institutional-only studies understate firm agency and cannot explain performance variation among similarly regulated firms. Studies with no theoretical anchor at all, the majority of the corpus, cannot distinguish direct effects from moderated or endogenous ones. By formally proposing regulatory framework as a moderator, this review offers a more theoretically complete, and more testable, account than the additive or purely descriptive treatments dominant in the reviewed literature. It also explicitly flags the moderator's possible endogeneity to strategy choice (P5).

Practical and Managerial Implications

For Kenyan fresh produce exporters, the synthesis suggests that the choice among direct sales, e-commerce, and strategic partnerships should be made contingent on a firm's existing resource base (RBV). It should also reflect its accumulated experiential knowledge of destination-market institutions (Uppsala). The choice should not be treated as a uniform best practice. Firms with limited capital and export experience may find strategic partnerships a more viable entry route, provided they invest deliberately in the alliance-management capabilities that Mardatillah et al. (2019) identify as decisive. Firms with established buyer relationships and compliance systems are better positioned to capture

the higher margins associated with direct sales or e-commerce (Jeannet et al., 2021; Hansen & Drecker, 2023).

Policy Implications

For Kenyan regulators and industry bodies (KEPHIS, the Horticultural Crops Directorate, FPEAK), the review's central policy implication is that regulatory coherence, rather than regulatory volume, plausibly determines whether firms can convert direct export strategies into competitive advantage. Bertheussen's (2021) evidence of large performance differentials tied to institutional conditions within a single national value-chain suggests that inconsistent enforcement, rather than regulation per se, may be the more binding constraint on Kenyan exporters. This points toward a policy agenda focused on predictable, harmonised implementation of existing standards (KEPHIS certification, HCD licensing, destination-market requirements) rather than the introduction of additional compliance layers.

Limitations

This review has four limitations. First, as an integrative rather than a systematic review, it does not report a registered search-and-screening protocol or quantitative effect-size pooling. Its synthesis is interpretive and thematic. Second, the corpus draws primarily on publicly accessible, predominantly English-language sources, which may underrepresent French- or Portuguese-language African scholarship on export strategy. Third, several studies synthesised here (Ahmad et al., 2021, 2024) operate at the national or commodity level rather than the firm-level, and their inclusion is for contextual comparison rather than direct evidentiary weight on firm-level competitive advantage. Fourth, because the review synthesises secondary sources, its conclusions are bounded by the methodological quality and disclosed limitations of the underlying primary studies, which vary considerably across the corpus.

Conclusion

This review has synthesised theoretical and empirical scholarship on direct sales, e-commerce, and strategic partnerships as strategic drivers of competitive advantage among exporting firms. It has applied the regulatory framework as the institutional mechanism moderating this relationship. The synthesis demonstrates that, notwithstanding a substantial evidence base, the literature remains theoretically fragmented, methodologically homogeneous, and disconnected from fresh produce exporting. No Kenyan study examines the full construct set of direct export strategy, regulatory framework, and competitive advantage among horticultural exporters. The review integrates the Resource-Based View, the Uppsala Internationalisation Model, Institutional Theory, and Porter's Diamond Model into a single nested framework. It advances five testable propositions, including an explicit rival explanation concerning regulatory endogeneity. In doing so, it provides a theoretical foundation and an empirical research agenda for scholars. It also offers actionable implications for exporters, industry bodies, and regulators seeking to strengthen Kenya's competitive position in global fresh produce trade.

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