



Network competence for the bottom of pyramid markets: Evidence from cross-border networking between exporters and intermediaries

Huda Khan^{a,b,c,*} , Richard Lee^d, Zaheer Khan^{a,b,e} , Stefanos Mouzas^f

^a Business School, University of Aberdeen, UK

^b Africa-Asia Centre for Sustainability, University of Aberdeen, UK

^c Innolab, University of Vaasa, Finland

^d UniSA Business, University of South Australia, Australia

^e School of Marketing and Communications, International Business, University of Vaasa, Finland

^f Management School, Lancaster University, UK

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ABSTRACT

Social innovation poses significant challenges for firms operating in today's dynamic business environment. In bottom-of-the-pyramid (BoP) markets in particular, it requires collaborative networking among firms to facilitate access to underserved communities. Adopting a network perspective as a theoretical lens, this study examines how social innovation emerges through the interplay of actors, resources, and activities. The findings identify three network competencies shaping exporting firm's BoP orientation: (i) the marketing capabilities of intermediaries; (ii) the cross-border resources of exporting firms; and (iii) strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries. These competencies complement BOP orientation, which in turn influences social innovation outcomes. Moreover, exporters' BOP orientation positively interacts with their purposeful societal goals to further enhance social innovation. This study contributes to social innovation research by demonstrating the critical role of intermediaries in BoP markets and by elaborating on the managerial and policy implications of socially driven innovation strategies.

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, social innovation has become a mainstream concern for international firms (Dionisio & de Vargas, 2020; Matus-Ruiz et al., 2025). Defined as organizational activities or initiatives aimed at addressing societal needs (Nguyen et al., 2023), social innovation reflects how organizations create value by improving social outcomes for particular communities and stakeholder groups. In response to growing global problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality, firms are increasingly expected to pursue business strategies that generate both economic and social benefits (Babu & Pinstrup-Andersen, 2007; Lee et al., 2019).

Bottom-of-the-pyramid (BoP) markets, characterized by low-income consumers and limited infrastructure, present both opportunities and challenges for firms (Pillai et al., 2024). Scholars have noted the economic potential of BoP markets due to their size while also highlighting the institutional weaknesses that make operating in these environments

challenging (Mason & Chakrabarti, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2023). Similarly, Prahalad (2012) viewed BoP markets as promising grounds for radical innovation, whereas others have expressed concerns about institutional voids, limited market data, and regulatory uncertainty (Adomako et al., 2024; Matus-Ruiz et al., 2025; Rao-Nicholson et al., 2017; Simanis, 2012; World-Economic-Forum, January 2025).

Recent research that brings together the disparate fields of social innovation and BoP strategy highlights the difficulty of implementing socially driven initiatives in these settings. Firms often learn and develop capabilities through partnerships (Stadtler et al., 2024), and address the lack of supportive ecosystems (Del Giudice et al., 2019), as well as the presence of institutional voids (Lashitew et al., 2022; Matus-Ruiz et al., 2025). These challenges are compounded by resource scarcity and social exclusion, which undermine efforts to create inclusive business models (World Varadarajan, 2014; Vision, 2023).

Confronted with these challenges, social innovation in BoP markets typically involves coordination among multiple stakeholders, including

* Corresponding author at: Business School, University of Aberdeen, UK.

E-mail addresses: huda.khan@abdn.ac.uk (H. Khan), richard.lee@unisa.edu.au (R. Lee), zaheer.khan@abdn.ac.uk (Z. Khan), s.mouzas@lancaster.ac.uk (S. Mouzas).

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exporting firms, intermediaries, NGOs, and local community actors (Khan et al., 2025; Mair et al., 2012). Each party brings different objectives, constraints, and capabilities to the collaboration. The complexity of these interactions—shaped by institutional gaps, cultural differences, and limited resources—means that traditional innovation frameworks are often insufficient. Instead, a more integrated, networked approach is needed (c.f. Lawson-Lartego & Mathiassen, 2021; Pillai et al., 2024; Reficco & Márquez, 2012).

Exporting firms operating in BoP markets often rely on intermediaries to navigate local contexts and nuances because intermediaries possess valuable knowledge of the local market (Bello & Williamson, 1985), are familiar with institutional norms (Jia et al., 2014; Xie & Li, 2018), and can manage suppliers and resource access effectively (Fung et al., 2007). By providing value added services, such as market intelligence, distribution support, and marketing assistance, intermediaries thus play a crucial role in enabling firms to develop context-specific, socially innovative offerings (Jenson et al., 2020; Mair et al., 2012; Rana & Sørensen, 2021; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024).

Despite these important roles of intermediaries, limited research exists on how exporters and intermediaries interact to support social innovation, particularly in BoP settings (Ho & Yoon, 2022). Most existing studies focus on developed economies and narrow functions. For example, Barraket (2020) examined how the purchasing power of Australian intermediaries created social value, while Kanda et al. (2018) documented the various functions played by intermediaries in eco-innovation in Germany. However, insights from developed markets may not be transferable to BoP contexts, which are typically shaped by entrenched volatile institutions and persistent development constraints (Lee et al., 2011). As a result, we still know relatively little about how exporter–intermediary relationships can support socially oriented innovation in environments where market-supporting institutions are weak (c.f. Rivera-Santos et al., 2012; Verbeke et al., 2024). This research gap is particularly glaring because the role of intermediaries in social innovation has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention (e.g., see Barraket, 2020). Thus, the central question guiding this study is: What factors enable firms to generate social innovation in BoP markets?

To address this gap, we adopt a network perspective as our theoretical lens (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Mouzas, 2024). From this perspective, business networking is considered as “the process through which all actors attempt to influence the evolving substance of their interactions” (Ford & Mouzas, 2013, p. 436). The substance of interactions involves actors’ activities, resources, and the actors themselves (Ford & Mouzas, 2013). Building on this theoretical foundation, we examine how network competence, defined as *the ability of firms and their partners to mobilize and align complementary capabilities*, shapes the creation of social innovation in BoP markets. Viewing social innovation through this relational lens allows us to examine how collaborative capabilities across firms and intermediaries contribute to social innovation in resource-constrained environments. We propose that network competence consists of three interrelated dimensions: (1) the capabilities of intermediaries to support and execute the marketing and distribution activities of exporting firms; (2) the cross-border resources, such as infrastructure and organizational processes, provided by exporters; and (3) the strategic partnerships between firms and intermediaries. Respectively, these three dimensions can also be viewed as representing an intermediary-side factor, a firm-side factor, and a factor that collaboratively binds the intermediary and the firm.

For complex solutions like social innovation, businesses often rely on intermediaries in BoP markets to execute activities because these markets frequently lack reliable legal systems, transparent governance, and effective regulatory frameworks (Peng & Ilinitch, 1998). To execute these activities successfully, firms must provide adequate cross-border resources to support BoP intermediaries, who typically lack resources, including information technologies (Cortez & Johnston, 2017), as well as operational skills and know-how (Fung et al., 2007) needed for social innovation. Similarly, due to the inherent institutional voids in BoP

markets, social innovation requires strong strategic collaborations (Lashitew et al., 2022). However, while these capabilities are known individually, their combined role (e.g., network competence) in supporting social innovation in BoP markets has not been systematically studied. Hitherto, no studies on the role of intermediaries have examined how network competence affects firms’ ability to exploit opportunities for social innovation in BoP markets (see the selected studies in Appendix A). Yet the three factors of network competence are particularly critical for successful social innovation in these contexts.

We further argue that network competence complements BoP orientation, which in turn promotes social innovation. The conceptualization of BoP orientation stems from the market orientation perspective, whereby it is defined as “a firm’s capability that directs the development of its products, and strategies tailored specifically to the unique characteristics and requirements of the base-of-the-pyramid market segments” (Zhu et al., 2019, p. 3). We contend that exporting firm’s network competence will foster its BoP orientation as firms often neglect these markets due to resource constraints and limited access. With stronger network-based competencies and resources, firms may be better able to enhance their orientation toward these distant and underserved markets for sustainability initiatives (Morgan et al., 2019). Examining this relationship helps explain how collaborative capabilities translate into strategic orientations toward underserved markets.

However, BoP orientation for social innovation may be contingent on the extent of a firm’s intrinsic purpose or desire to serve social needs in BoP markets. While social value creation can increase costs and potentially reduce profits (Fisk, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2023), it can also enhance a firm’s competitiveness, and is often regarded as a form of corporate social responsibility that firms seek—or feel obliged—to fulfil (Adomako & Tran, 2022; Phillips et al., 2015). Hence, purposeful societal goals may moderate the relationship between a firm’s BoP orientation and social innovation.

Our study offers three key contributions: First, we develop and empirically test a novel framework that integrates both firm-level and intermediary-level factors, as well as their combined influence, on social innovation in BoP markets. In doing so, we highlight the crucial role of collaborative capabilities in supporting social innovation in resource-constrained environment. Second, we extend the literature on market orientation and corporate social responsibilities by positioning BoP orientation as a facilitating capability for social innovation. Third, we identify purposeful societal goals as a key contingency that strengthen the relationship between BoP orientation and social innovation outcomes.

As social innovation can play a crucial role in lifting BoP communities out of poverty (Babu & Pinstrip-Andersen, 2007; Sinkovics et al., 2014), extending our understanding of the drivers of social innovation in BoP markets is particularly important. Scholars have highlighted the lack of research in this area and called for further studies (Matus-Ruiz et al., 2025; Rygh, 2020; Xiao et al., 2024). In parallel, the United Nations, through its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) initiative (UNDP, 2015), encourages practitioners and policymakers to move beyond purely economic objectives and focus on generating social impact in low-income countries. Our study contributes to this agenda by offering insights that can assist policymakers in BoP markets in designing effective programs to support investment in social innovation. This, in turn, can guide firms seeking to pursue socially impactful strategies in BoP contexts characterized by challenging living conditions (Pillai et al., 2024; UNDP, 2015).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Following the introduction, the next section outlines the conceptual foundations and develops hypotheses related to social innovation and the role of intermediaries. Section 3 describes the research methodology, including data collection procedures, measurement scales, and detailed data analyses. Section 4 presents the findings, while Section 5 discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of the study. Finally, the paper concludes by offering directions for future research.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. The network capability in developing and executing marketing activities

Firms frequently rely on intermediaries when entering or operating in new markets, a well-established practice across industries (see selected studies in Appendix A). According to Peng and Ilinitch (1998), firms are especially likely to engage intermediaries when products are complex—as is often the case with social innovations—or when operating in distant and unfamiliar contexts, such as BoP markets.

In BoP markets, which are characterized by resource constraints and weak institutional structure (Verbeke et al., 2024), intermediaries play a vital role by providing essential knowledge and resources that exporting firms often lack. They also support the development of products and services tailored to the needs of underserved communities (De Silva et al., 2022). For example, downstream, intermediaries manage customer relationships, while upstream they maintain connections with supplying firms (Fung et al., 2007).

In BoP markets, managing both upstream and downstream relationships is especially demanding because supply chains are often fragmented supply chains, infrastructure is weak, and communities are dispersed and vulnerable. Cultural and linguistic differences can further complicate coordination. Together, these factors increase the likelihood of misalignment between firm strategies and market realities, making intermediaries a vital asset of the market system.

Social innovation are typically more complex than traditional offerings due to their dual aim of generating both commercial and social value (Rao-Nicholson et al., 2017), their need to align with local cultural norms, and the involvement of diverse stakeholder interests. These characteristics require customized approaches that intermediaries are often best positioned to deliver (Guerrero et al., 2021). Thus, intermediaries are particularly critical for firms delivering socially oriented products in BoP markets (Barraket, 2020; Ho & Yoon, 2022).

However, to be effective under such market conditions, intermediaries must possess capabilities that connect firms to their markets through effective marketing activities (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Mouzas, 2024). These capabilities help firms differentiate themselves from rivals and tailor their offerings to specific social needs (Herrera, 2015). Prior research indicates that marketing capabilities help firms develop social networks, tap into partner knowledge and competence, and access critical resources (Dhanaraj et al., 2004; Heidenreich, 2012). These capabilities are often viewed as a form of dynamic capability that facilitates social innovation (Khan et al., 2024).

The importance of intermediaries' marketing capabilities is magnified in BoP markets, which are institutionally and operationally more challenging than developed economies (Lashitew et al., 2022). Similarly, we contend that network intermediaries' capabilities in developing and executing the marketing activities of exporting firms ensure that focal firms' social innovation products remain competitive in BoP markets. These capabilities align with the broader notion of network competence, which reflects a firm's ability to mobilize external partners and orchestrate interactions across actors, resources, and activities when enacting innovation in emerging markets (c.f. Khan et al., 2018).

Unlike entrepreneurial (c.f. Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Wales et al., 2020) and market orientation (Jaworski & Kohli, 1996) – which are typically conceptualized as internal firm dispositions. BoP orientation depends heavily on contextual knowledge that firms rarely possess prior to entering these markets. Therefore, understanding BoP contexts requires insight into informal norms, institutional gaps, and community-level constraints, all of which are difficult to discern without local engagement (Pillai et al., 2024). As a result, we suggest that BoP orientation is more plausibly shaped through firms' interactions with capable intermediaries rather than formed independently beforehand.

We further argue that when firms perceive their intermediaries to possess strong marketing capabilities, they are more likely to develop a

BoP orientation. In this study, we refer to a firm's BoP orientation as the extent to which the firm prioritizes and develops solutions to meet customer needs in BoP markets (Nguyen et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2019). Although some firms may begin with a BoP orientation embedded in their strategic goals and then choose suitable partners to realize that vision, we suggest that in many cases such orientation develops through firms' engagement with capable intermediaries. Particularly in unfamiliar markets, firms depend on intermediaries to reveal market needs, customer behaviors, and institutional challenges they might not otherwise anticipate. These interactions help firms understand the market more clearly, thereby fostering a BoP orientation that shapes their approach. Furthermore, intermediaries can play an interpretive role, helping firms understand local realities in contexts where formal data are scarce and often unreliable. In such settings, intermediaries become central to how firms learn, adapt, and orient their business models toward BoP markets. This perspective aligns with the networking view, which sees firm orientations and strategies as shaped through ongoing relationships rather than predetermined choices (Ford & Mouzas, 2013b; Mouzas, 2024). Based on the preceding discussion, we propose the following:

H1. *The capabilities of intermediaries in developing and executing the marketing activities of exporting firms are positively associated with exporting firms' BoP orientation.*

2.2. Cross-border resources

Intermediaries act as organizational bridges that connect firms to customers in foreign markets. Prior research shows that when firms provide enabling support (e.g., access to information technologies, data analytics, experienced personnel), intermediaries are better equipped to perform their roles, ultimately improving firm performance (Cortez & Johnston, 2017). For example, the smooth provision of operational information enhances collaboration and leads to stronger outcomes (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Fung et al., 2007).

In the context of BoP markets, these resources are even more pertinent. The institutional gaps that characterize BoP environments, such as weak logistics, limited digital access, and low-quality data, require exporting firms to compensate by offering targeted support to their intermediaries. Cross-border resources therefore become not only operational tools but also mechanisms that help intermediaries overcome local constraints and deliver market-relevant solutions that would eventually benefit the firms.

Specifically for BoP-oriented social innovation, firms may need to deploy technology to support intermediaries in market-facing functions such as customer insight, distribution, and community engagement (Ho & Yoon, 2022). Technological infrastructure enables social innovation by linking value creation, supply chains, customer engagement processes, and financial models across partners, thereby supporting the successful delivery of these solutions in challenging environments (Ievoli et al., 2019). Lashitew et al. (2022) further argue that technology can reduce the cost and complexity of coordination across institutional boundaries in BoP markets, making it a crucial enabler of social innovation.

While firms with an established BoP orientation may be more inclined to invest in systems that support their intermediaries, we argue that such cross-border resources can also play formative role in shaping this orientation. In uncertain or unfamiliar markets, firms typically rely on their internal infrastructure and processes to build local understanding and enhance partner performance. As intermediaries become more effective through firm-provided support, they help surface market needs, clarify social demands, and demonstrate what is operationally feasible within BoP contexts. In this way, cross-border resources act as an early enabler by laying the groundwork for firms to recognize and prioritize BoP markets as a strategic focus. These arguments align with the networking perspective, which views organizational orientation as

emerging through interactive learning and adaptation within partner networks (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Mouzas, 2024).

Drawing on the above studies, we therefore propose that:

H2. *Cross-border resources of exporting firms (processes and infrastructure) that support intermediaries are positively associated with exporting firms' BoP orientation.*

2.3. Strategic partnerships between partners

It is well-established in the business management literature that success in B2B markets often depends on mutually beneficial, long-term partnerships between firms and their intermediaries (see studies in Appendix A). Fung et al. (2007) argue that the greater the interdependence between business partners, the more critical it becomes to develop and maintain a relationship that delivers reciprocal value. Similarly, Ford and Mouzas (2013, p. 437) provide evidence that collaborative interactions lead involved actors to co-evolve, adjusting “their ways of thinking, their organizational structure, their expectations and aspirations” to accommodate and sustain the relationship. Interactive decision-making and alignment of business objectives between partners promote trust, cooperation, and long-term satisfaction (Guercini et al., 2014; La Rocca et al., 2017; La Rocca et al., 2019).

Extending this logic to the role of intermediaries in BoP markets, we propose that strategic partnerships between exporting firms and their intermediaries are particularly important for achieving social innovation. Rather than depending largely on the efforts of a single party, harnessing the combined inputs and resources of both firms and intermediaries is key to delivering positive social innovation outcomes (Garud & Karnøe, 2003; Purtik & Arenas, 2019). In this respect, the co-participation of counterparts and their mutual inter-firm adaptation appear critical (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Mouzas, 2024). Without such alignment, mismatched priorities or fragmented execution may create frictions that undermine social innovation efforts.

Similarly, Lashitew et al. (2022) argue that, because of institutional voids, informal norms, and regulatory ambiguity, strong partnerships are essential to coordinate activities, share burdens, and sustain socially driven initiatives. In these contexts, strategic partnerships become more than an operational convenience; they function as adaptive mechanisms that allow firms to interpret complex social needs, co-develop context-specific innovations, and maintain a long-term orientation in markets that are otherwise highly unstable (Pillai et al., 2024). Furthermore, partnerships serve as learning platforms where firms discover unmet needs, build local legitimacy, and recognize the feasibility of addressing social challenges. Thus, we conceptualize strategic partnerships not as outcomes of BoP orientation but as contributors to its formation, particularly in the early or exploratory stages of market entry. Based on this rationale, we propose the following:

H3. *Strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries are positively associated with the exporting firms' BoP orientation.*

Corollary to the three hypotheses above (H1-H3), it is important to clarify the theoretical distinction between network competence and BoP orientation. While their conceptual relationships are inherently interlinked and proximal—particularly when cross-border resources are considered as part of relational capabilities—they are conceptually distinct. Network competence refers to the firm's inter-organizational capability to coordinate, align, and mobilize resources across partnerships, with an emphasis on the operational and relational mechanisms that enable collaboration. In contrast, BoP orientation reflects a strategic posture, capturing the firm's intent and commitment to understanding and serving the needs of BoP market segments. The distinction lies in their respective focus, as the former centers on external capability deployment, while the latter pertains to strategic market prioritization. Recognizing this conceptual boundary allows us to treat them as separate constructs, both theoretically and empirically.

2.4. The effects of BoP orientation on social innovation

The market orientation literature consistently finds that when firms focus on understanding and satisfying customer needs, they are more likely to develop products that deliver value, which in turn leads to positive performance outcome (B. J. Jaworski, Kohli, 1996; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver et al., 1998). Extending this principle to underserved contexts, we contend that a firm's orientation toward BoP markets enables the development of socially innovative products tailored to the specific needs of these customers (Nguyen et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2019).

BoP orientation serves as a strategic conduit through which network competence—operationalized through intermediary capabilities, cross-border resources, and strategic partnerships—is translated into effective social innovation outcomes. BoP markets are characterized by institutional voids, infrastructure gaps, and complex consumer needs. As such, a BoP orientation helps firms navigate these complexities and apply their network competencies in ways that are both context-appropriate and socially impactful. More specifically, BoP-oriented firms are better positioned to leverage marketing capabilities developed with intermediaries, thereby enhancing their responsiveness to local needs, an essential tenet of market orientation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). In parallel, cross-border resources help facilitate access to local knowledge and customer insights, while strategic partnerships create shared spaces for experimentation and learning. Taken together, these competencies are more likely to generate social innovation outcomes when they are guided by a clear orientation toward BoP markets. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4. *Network competence factors are positively associated with exporting firms' BOP orientation, which in turn is positively associated with greater social innovation.*

2.5. The moderating role of purposeful societal goals

Volberda and colleagues (2025) argue that organizations are increasingly being challenged to define themselves by their contributions to society and the planet, rather than solely by the pursuit of profit. Drawing on prior studies (Gartenberg et al., 2019; Hsieh et al., 2018), we define societal goal as a firm's purposeful efforts to establish goals and use resources for the meaningful good of society. Purposeful societal goals differ from traditional corporate missions (e.g., see Campbell & Yeung, 1991), which tend to emphasize a company's aspirations or business ambitions. In contrast, purposeful societal goals focus on tangible societal contributions (Hsieh et al., 2018; Souder et al., 2026). In pursuing these goals, firms integrate social values into viable business strategies, generating both social value and economic gains through sustained competitive advantage (Lynn, 2021). Lynn (2021) refers to this as a pluralism model, in which ethically good actions intersect with economically rewarding ones.

Extending hypothesis H4, we posit that the effect of BoP orientation on social innovation is strengthened when firms embrace purposeful societal goals. Firms are more likely to develop social innovation initiatives in BoP markets when they are both oriented toward those markets and motivated by a clear intention to generate societal impact. Purposeful societal goals lend ethical legitimacy and strategic coherence to BoP orientation by articulating the social outcomes (e.g., poverty alleviation or improved public health) that the firm seeks to achieve through its innovations (Gartenberg et al., 2019; Hsieh et al., 2018). Firms with stronger societal goals are also more willing to commit resources to support their BoP orientation, thereby intensifying its effect on social innovation outcomes. This reasoning is consistent with the resource-based view and institutional theory, which suggest that purpose-driven behavior facilitates resource mobilization and improves institutional fit, particularly in uncertain environments such as BoP markets (Peng & Ilinitch, 1998). Thus, we posit that:

H5. The BoP orientation of exporting firms positively interacts with their purposeful societal goals to positively influence their social innovation.

Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual model and the relationships among the five hypotheses presented.

3. Methods

3.1. Context

Pakistan's international exports have grown significantly in line with the country's broader globalization aspirations. A significant amount of the total export earnings originates from exporting to BoP markets, which comprise both Asian and non-Asian regions (World-Bank, 2021). Products originating from Pakistan often face challenges stemming from their emerging-market status and perceptions of inferior quality. As a result, Pakistani firms often encounter difficulties in establishing legitimacy in BoP markets.

BoP societies are characterized by widespread social issues that require active intervention from firms to address pressing societal challenges. By addressing these problems, firms can contribute to social well-being, while enhancing their own reputations through building positive social capital. Despite this opportunity, many firms lack access to BoP markets in terms of value-added services such as distribution, advertising, market planning, and local market knowledge. Prior studies have shown that firms are more likely to appoint intermediaries in foreign markets when those markets are perceived as distant or institutionally complex (Klein et al., 1990). Particularly with Pakistani exporters, they would thus rely on intermediaries to access these challenging or underserved market segments (Ahn et al., 2011; Peng & Ilinitch, 1998).

Additionally, social innovation is inherently complex and typically requires firms to leverage network-based capabilities (Littlewood & Khan, 2018). Peng and Ilinitch (1998) suggest that firms would benefit from engaging intermediaries with complex products like social innovations. As such, the context of exporting and the role of intermediaries becomes highly relevant to understanding how social innovation is developed in BoP markets. This reinforces the relevance of intermediaries in navigating the social and commercial challenges of BoP environments.

3.2. Data collection procedure

From the industry and export directories, Chamber of Commerce, 283 businesses that could potentially be respondents for our survey were identified. Then, businesses who do not target the BoP markets or

declined to take part were excluded. Companies that do not work with BoP intermediaries to provide value-added services, such as market research, product research and design, marketing strategy development, advertising and promotion, distributor selection and training for social innovation, were also filtered out. To avoid industry bias, the present study concentrated on manufacturing companies. We first examined Pakistan's Trading Economics website to gather basic data on the product categories and market types of Pakistani exporters (Trading-Economics, 2023a, 2023b). By using this method, we could determine which manufacturing industry are actively exporting to the BoP markets. As a result, we explicitly targeted these industries for gathering data. For instance, we found that Pakistan's primary exports to the various BoP markets are food items, refined copper, packaged medications, sports equipment, medical and surgical supplies, cement, and cotton and textile-related products, among others (Trading-Economics, 2023b; World-Bank, 2021).

Eventually, 87 businesses took part in this study. The survey data was collected from the senior managers of the companies. They were also asked to snowball the questionnaire to their business network, leading to a further 23 usable responses; leading to the final sample size of 110 responses (approximately 39% response rate). Following commonly used technique to determine sample size adequacy (Von Delft et al., 2019), we ran a post hoc G*power test using path-by-path predictor correlations of the stated hypothesis; the lowest G*Power was.832, above the threshold of.800 for statistical adequacy of the sample size. Furthermore, our sample size is similar to other studies on internationalizing firms (Ghauri et al., 2016).

The participating firms were small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with > 50–250 employees. The majority proportion of firms were over 15 years old (89%), while the remaining 11% where 10–15 years old. The product types included food (n = 56), textile (n = 33), pharmaceuticals and medical/surgical equipment (n = 13), sports goods (n = 5), and cement (n = 3). The average number of the firms' export markets was 5.48. The managers perceived that the intermediary prior experience with social innovation projects averaged 5.86 (on a 1–7 scale, where 1 = very inexperienced; 7 = very experienced). Since postal and online surveys had low response rates as pointed in earlier studies in this market, we employed paid research assistants in Pakistan to administer the survey.

3.3. Scales

This study adapted scales from quality published studies. To confirm the quality of instruments, we shared the questionnaire with a subject knowledge expert academic in the literature on social innovation. In

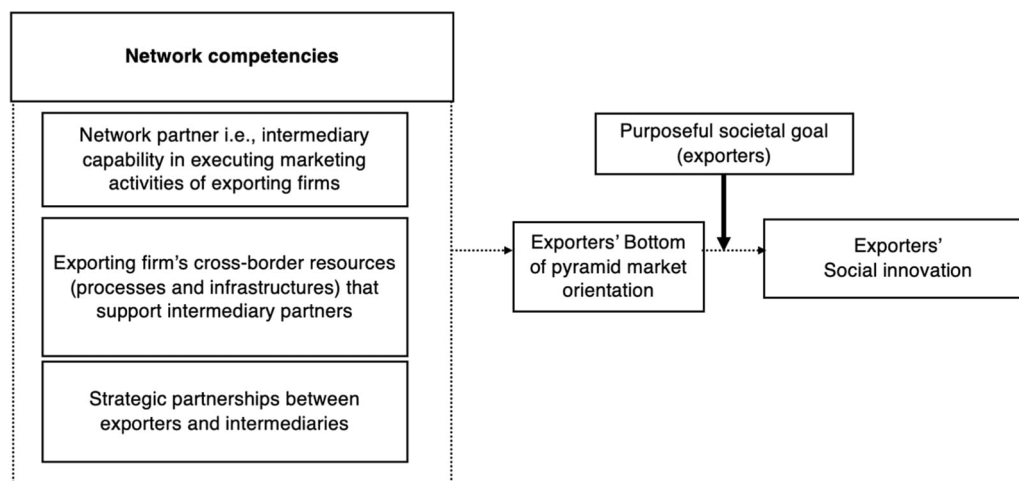


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework.

answering the survey, we requested the managers to consider the firm's most important BoP export market for which they use value-added intermediary services (for market research, product research and design, development of marketing strategies, advertising and promotion, selection and training of distributors) for the firms' social innovation products. We requested the managers to consider the firm's situation for the past three year. All items were captured on 1–7 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), except for societal orientation (where 1 = not important at all; 7 = very important).

3.3.1. Intermediary capabilities in developing and executing marketing activities of exporting firms

The 5-item scale for partners' marketing capabilities of intermediaries was adapted from Khan and Khan (2021). The concept is defined and operationalized as marketing-specific capabilities of intermediary services i.e., marketing planning skills, ability to help the exporting firms in segmenting and targeting, skills in marketing promotions and strategies development, and ability to develop detailed marketing plan and processes for social innovation.

3.3.2. Strategic partnership between exporting firm and intermediary

The four items for this scale for strategic partnerships were adapted from Kim et al. (2013). This scale is conceptualized and operationalized as a partnership between exporting firms and intermediaries for developing collaborative strategic plans, projecting forecasting and planning the demands for social innovation.

3.3.3. Cross-border resources

The 4-item scale for cross-border resources that support intermediaries was adapted from earlier cited studies (Luo & Bu, 2018; Martinez & Jarillo, 1989). This is conceptualized and operationalized as the systems, processes and infrastructure of exporting firms that facilitate planning and coordination with intermediaries, supporting international operations, and meeting with intermediaries to solve problems.

3.3.4. BoP orientation

The six items for BoP orientation were adapted from the cited studies (Nguyen et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2019). BoP orientation is often conceptualized as firm's capability that directs the development of its products, and strategies tailored specifically to the unique characteristics and requirements of the base of the pyramid market segments (Zhu et al., 2019, p. 3). In this study, we conceptualize and operationalize it as the extent to which firms prioritize and develop solutions to meet customer needs in BoP markets (Nguyen et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2019). Specifically, the construct covers firms' orientation to explore the market opportunities in BoP market, invest in uncovering the BoP consumer characteristics, consider the needs of BoP consumers in serving this segment including their product usage, affordability and education levels.

3.3.5. Purposeful societal goals

This 4-item scale was adapted from Lortie et al. (2017). The scale covers how important it is for exporting firms to establish social goals, fulfil social needs, help people other than customers, and use resources for socially oriented purposes.

3.3.6. Social innovation

The six item for social innovation were adapted from Nguyen et al. (2023). The social innovation scale was operationalized to the extent of exporting firm's social innovation for the most important BOP market. The scale covers the exporting firms' development of products and services that satisfy social needs, have social impact, solve social problems, improve standards of life, and benefit society. It also covers how social innovation may serve both material and non-material human needs.

3.3.7. Marker variable

As a marker for common method bias assessment, we included a 4-item scale on respondent's satisfaction with a restaurant last visited, taken from Khan et al. (2024); Zhou et al. (2019). The scale captured satisfaction on 1–7 scale (1 = highly dissatisfied and 7 = highly satisfied).

3.3.8. Control variables

Additionally, we recorded the exporting firm's age, the number of its export markets, the BoP markets to which they export, and the export product-type. The managerial perception of intermediary prior experience with social innovation projects was recorded on 1–7 scale (whereby 1 = very inexperienced; 7 = very experienced) for the purpose of control.

3.4. Common method bias

Using an ex-ante strategy to address common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012), we made sure the questionnaire was written clearly in plain English. An independent academic with subject-matter expertise reviewed the instrument. We also varied the order of the variables to keep the respondents from speculating about the plausible relationships. To prevent confusion or uncertainty, we explained any potentially unfamiliar terms. As an ex-post, a theoretically unrelated construct on restaurant performance was included in the survey as a marker (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Section 4 reports the common method bias results, which found no concerns.

3.5. Endogeneity

To address potential endogeneity concerns arising from omitted variable bias, we implemented several steps in line with established recommendations in the literature (Wu et al., 2023). First, in relation to firm-level variation, we controlled for key characteristics, including firm age, product type, BoP market, intermediary experience, and the number of export markets. Second, to minimize industry-specific effects, we restricted our sample to manufacturing firms.

Endogeneity may occur when an independent variable is significantly correlated with the error term of the dependent variable, potentially biasing the estimated relationships (Ebbes et al., 2021; Rutz & Watson, 2019). To test for such confounding effects, we ran Gaussian copula analysis approach using SMART-PLS v4 software (Eckert & Hohberger, 2023; Park & Gupta, 2012); the p-values for the copulas across the main hypothesized relationships ranged from .172 to .823, indicating that endogeneity is unlikely to be a concern in our model. This analytical step strengthened the validity of the estimated effects, particularly given the cross-sectional nature of our data. The combination of control variables and the copula approach provided confidence in the robustness of our findings.

3.6. Response bias assessment

Using an ex-post procedure, we analyzed the differences between the early vs late respondents (Fowler Jr, 2013) by running an independent t-test on the demographic variables (firm age, product types, BoP market, number of export markets, and intermediary experience), and the main variables of the study. The differences between early vs late respondents were insignificant, with lowest p-value = .134 (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). Hence, the data possessed no response bias concern.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analysis

As shown in Table 1, all items loaded significantly onto their corresponding factors, with the lowest factor loading at .680 and the lowest

Table 1
Factor Loading and Composite Reliabilities of Questionnaire Items.

| Items | Loadings |
|---|----------|
| Intermediary's capabilities in developing and executing marketing activities of exporting firm (CR =.921) | |
| 1. The intermediary service has marketing planning skills in social innovation. | .811 |
| 2. The intermediary service has helped in effectively segmenting and targeting communities for social innovation. | .851 |
| 3. The intermediary service has used marketing skills in promoting our social innovation. | .857 |
| 4. The intermediary has helped in developing creative marketing strategies for social innovations. | .828 |
| 5. The intermediary has helped in developing a detailed marketing processes for social innovation. | .837 |
| Cross-border resources of exporting firm (CR =.863) | |
| 1. Our firm has set a specialized department (e.g., strategic planning office/department) to overhaul and coordinate with intermediaries. | .773 |
| 2. Our firm has built a comprehensive information system to support global operations via intermediaries. | .796 |
| 3. Within our functional departments, there are also professionals participating in relevant overseas planning and coordination with intermediaries. | .753 |
| 4. Top executives frequently (at least every quarter) meet intermediaries to discuss significant decisions and to solve problems that require coordination. | .806 |
| Strategic partnerships between exporting firm and intermediary (CR =.929) | |
| 1. Our firm has developed strategic plans for social innovation in collaboration with this intermediary. | .875 |
| 2. Our firm projected and planed future demand of social innovation collaboratively with this intermediary. | .859 |
| 3. Collaboration in social innovation demand forecasting and planning with our intermediary is something we always do. | .878 |
| 4. Our firm always forecast and plan social innovation activities collaboratively with this intermediary. | .890 |
| Bottom of pyramid (BoP) orientation of exporting firm (CR =.923) | |
| 1. Endeavoured to explore market opportunities in the BoP market (such as develop new products and formulate business strategies to serve this market) | .790 |
| 2. Invested in uncovering the BoP consumer characteristics | .862 |
| 3. Thoroughly considered the needs of BoP consumers in serving this segment | .829 |
| 4. Thoroughly considered BoP consumer product usage context in serving this segment | .838 |
| 5. Thoroughly considered BoP consumer affordability in serving this segment | .799 |
| 6. Thoroughly considered BoP consumer's education level to understand product related information in serving this segment | .782 |
| Purposeful societal goals of exporting firm (CR =.949) | |
| 1. Establishing social goals | .886 |
| 2. Fulfilling social needs | .930 |
| 3. Helping people other than customers | .910 |
| 4. Using resources for socially oriented purpose | .902 |
| Exporters' social innovation (CR =.874) | |
| 1. Our company has developed products and services that have social impact. | .772 |
| 2. The value of our products and services is beneficial to society as a whole. | .783 |
| 3. Our products and services served both material and non-material human needs. | .753 |
| 4. Our company has developed products and services that has solved social problems. | .680 |
| 5. Our products and services have improved the standards of life. | .701 |
| 6. Our company has developed products and services that satisfy social needs and improve living standards | .702 |

composite reliability at.874. These results indicate that all measurement scales possessed acceptable reliability and construct validity.

The lowest average variance extracted (AVE) was.537, which exceeds the recommended threshold of.50 (Table 2). Further, each construct's AVE was greater than the squared correlations with other constructs (see the correlations reported in Table 2), thereby supporting discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

4.2. Common method bias

Following Lindell and Whitney (2001) marker variable approach for assessing and adjusting for common method bias using the correlations among the main study variables, we noted the lowest observed correlation ($r = .004$, between the marker variable and social innovation). After adjusting the correlations between the main constructs using this value, all previously significant relationships remained statistically significant at $p < .05$. This provided further evidence that common method bias was not a concern in this study.

4.3. Main findings

We analyzed the conceptual framework using structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS, with 5000 bootstrap samples. The five models used to test the hypotheses are reported in Table 3. The overall measurement model demonstrates a good fit to the data (CFI =.92, IFI =.92, TLI =.90, $\chi^2/df = 1.31$, $p < .01$, RMSEA =.05, SRMR =.06).

Model 1 shows that all the three competencies—the network partner's (i.e., intermediary's) capabilities in developing and executing the marketing activities of exporting firms ($\beta = .211$, $p = .049$), cross-border resources that support intermediaries ($\beta = .263$, $p = .046$), and strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries ($\beta = .320$, $p = .010$)—positively influenced BoP orientation. These results support Hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, respectively.

Model 2 examined the direct effects of the three competencies on social innovation. The results indicated that network partner capabilities ($\beta = .233$, $p = .041$), cross-border resources that support intermediaries ($\beta = .325$, $p = .012$), and strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries ($\beta = .259$, $p = .021$) all significantly and positively influenced social innovation.

However, in Model 3 where BoP orientation was introduced, the direct effect of network partner capabilities in developing and executing marketing activities of exporting firms ($\beta = .126$, $p = .289$), cross-border resources that support intermediaries ($\beta = .236$, $p = .116$), and strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries ($\beta = .085$, $p = .537$) on social innovation became insignificant. Meanwhile, the effects of network partner's capabilities in developing and executing marketing activities of exporting firms ($\beta = .209$, $p = .046$), cross-border resources that support intermediaries ($\beta = .260$, $p = .037$), and strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries ($\beta = .332$, $p = .006$) on BoP orientation were positive and significant, and the effects of BoP orientation on social innovation were positive and significant ($\beta = .328$, $p = .018$). Collectively, these results support hypothesis H4.

Model 4 included the main effect of the moderator (purposeful societal goals) on social innovation. Model 5 further added the interaction term between BoP orientation and purposeful societal goals. The results in Model 5 showed that network partner capabilities in developing and executing marketing activities of exporting firms ($\beta = .212$, $p = .044$), cross-border resources that support intermediaries ($\beta = .271$, $p = .030$), and strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries ($\beta = .323$, $p = .008$) remained significant predictors of BoP orientation. Moreover, BoP orientation continued to positively influence social innovation ($\beta = .410$, $p = .002$). Crucially, the interaction effect between BoP orientation and purposeful societal goals was positive and significant ($\beta = .368$, $p < .01$), thereby supporting hypothesis H5.

Fig. 2 graphically illustrates these moderation effects and confirms the enhancing role of purposeful societal goals in strengthening the BoP orientation–social innovation relationship.

5. Theoretical, managerial and policy implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

As international businesses face increasingly complex challenges,

Table 2
Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Correlations.

| | Mean (SD) | AVE | IMC | SP | CBR | BoP | PSG | SI |
|-----|---------------|------|-----|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| IMC | 4.831 (1.099) | .701 | — | .424** | .340** | .424** | 0.108 | .365** |
| SP | 4.925 (1.161) | .767 | | — | .481** | .514** | -0.011 | .405** |
| CBR | 4.923 (.975) | .612 | | | — | .442** | 0.071 | .387** |
| BoP | 4.947 (1.239) | .668 | | | | — | .196* | .481** |
| PSG | 4.157 (1.594) | .823 | | | | | — | 0.044 |
| SI | 5.224 (.861) | .537 | | | | | | — |

IMC = Intermediary capabilities in developing and executing marketing activities; SP = strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries; CBR = cross-border resources that support intermediaries; BoP = bottom of pyramid market orientation; SI = social innovation; PSG = purposeful societal goals
* p at.05 level and **p at.01 level.

Table 3
Main findings.

| Effects | BoP | | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Model 1 (Direct effects) | Model 2 (Direct effects) | Model 3 (Mediation) | Model 4 (Moderator) | Model 5 (Moderator + interaction) |
| Direct | | | | | |
| IMC → SI | | .233 (.041) | .126 (.289) | .130 (.275) | .148 (.173) |
| SP → SI | | .259 (.021) | .085 (.537) | .073 (.599) | .051 (.686) |
| CBR → SI | | .325 (.012) | .236 (.116) | .241 (.113) | .159 (.241) |
| IMC → BoP | .211 (.049) | | .209 (.046) | .211 (.044) | .212 (.044) |
| SP → BoP | .320 (.010) | | .332 (.006) | .322 (.008) | .323 (.008) |
| CBR → BoP | .263 (.046) | | .260 (.037) | .273 (.029) | .271 (.030) |
| Moderator | | | | | |
| PSG → SI | | | | -.061 (.514) | -.116 (.186) |
| PSG X BoP → SI | | | | | .368 (<.01) |
| Indirect | | | | | |
| BoP → SI | | | .328 (.018) | .340 (.014) | .410 (.002) |
| Controls | | | | | |
| Product type | .026 (.767) | .086 (.428) | .073 (.444) | .077 (.418) | .061 (.484) |
| BoP Market | .056 (.495) | .121 (.237) | .099 (.275) | .101 (.262) | .029 (.720) |
| # export markets | .041 (.632) | .017 (.871) | .001 (.990) | -.005 (.960) | -.010 (.908) |
| Firm age | -.021 (.800) | .042 (.671) | .045 (.613) | .048 (.593) | .011 (.887) |
| Intexp | .034 (.678) | -.024 (.812) | -.032 (.722) | -.035 (.693) | .027 (.740) |
| Model fit | | | | | |
| CFI | .94 | .91 | .93 | .92 | .91 |
| IFI | .94 | .91 | .93 | .93 | .92 |
| χ^2/df | 1.35; p = .001 | 1.40; p < .01 | 1.27; p < .01 | 1.28; p < .01 | 1.31; p < .01 |
| RMSEA | .06 | .06 | .05 | .05 | .05 |

*intexp = intermediary experience with social innovation projects; IMC = Intermediary capabilities in developing and executing marketing activities of exporting firms; SP = strategic partnerships between exporting firms and intermediaries; CBR = cross-border resources that support intermediaries; BoP = bottom of pyramid market orientation; SI = social innovation; PSG = purposeful societal goals

We ran 5000 no. of bootstrap samples with bias corrected confidence intervals of 95% for testing the five models.

Above the model fit section, all the path coefficients are reported outside brackets and p-values are reported within brackets.

It is noteworthy that all control variables are insignificant.

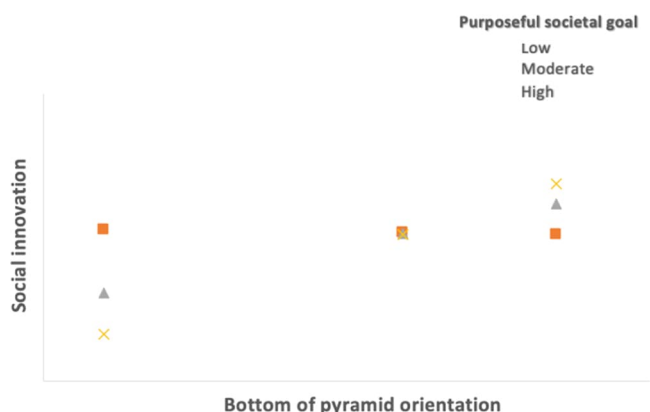


Fig. 2. Moderation Plot.

this study examined how firms generate social innovation in BoP markets. It emphasizes the critical role of intermediaries and, more specifically, the effects of B2B *network competence* (i.e., intermediaries’

capabilities in developing and executing marketing activities of exporting firms, cross-border resources, and strategic partnerships) in shaping social innovation.

Our findings reveal the mechanism through which these collaborative capabilities translate into socially innovative outcomes. Specifically, the mediation results suggest a sequencing logic: network competence enables BoP orientation, which in turn facilitates social innovation. Because BoP markets are often resource-constrained, a strong BoP orientation is more likely to result in positive social innovation outcomes. The moderation findings further highlight that corporate purpose is not peripheral but intensifies the effectiveness of BoP orientation in socially complex markets. In other words, BoP-oriented firms are more likely to achieve positive social innovation outcomes when they also possess purposeful societal goals.

By demonstrating these relationships, our study makes several contributions to the literature on social innovation and the mechanisms that support its development in BoP markets, as discussed below.

First, by highlighting the instrumental role of intermediaries in resource-constrained environments, our study contributes to the growing body of research that differentiates social innovation in BoP markets from that in developed markets. Prior work suggests that

intermediaries are vital for knowledge provision and for connecting diverse types of organizations (De Silva et al., 2022). We extend this understanding by showing that, in BoP contexts, intermediaries create enabling environments and support social innovation through *network competence-building* strategies. Our findings further suggest that intermediaries function not merely as facilitators of market entry but as capability amplifiers that enable exporting firms to mobilize resources and partnerships in ways that support socially oriented innovation. This perspective indicates that social innovation in such contexts should not be viewed solely as a firm-level initiative but as the outcome of purposeful networking that orchestrates the interaction of activities, resources, and actors (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Mouzas, 2024).

Second, our study advances theoretical understanding of the mechanisms that enable social innovation in BoP markets. Specifically, we identify the vital mediating role of BoP orientation, through which the three *network competencies* influence social innovation outcomes in BoP markets. By revealing this mediating effect, we highlight the conditions under which intermediaries and firms can collaborate effectively to support social innovation in BoP markets (Ho & Yoon, 2022). While prior research has often treated partnerships, capabilities, or market knowledge as direct drivers of social innovation (c.f. Littlewood & Khan, 2018; Sanzo-Pérez & Álvarez-González, 2022), our findings suggest that these competencies operate indirectly by shaping how firms orient themselves toward BoP markets. In this sense, BoP orientation acts as an organizing mechanism through which firms interpret opportunities, mobilize network resources, and prioritize socially relevant innovation.

Third, our findings demonstrate that purposeful societal goals serve as an important moderator of the BoP orientation–social innovation relationship. This insight adds to the limited body of work on contingency factors in social innovation research. Identifying societal goals as a key moderator offers a more nuanced understanding of how social innovation can be enabled in challenging environments. In particular, the results suggest that societal goals strengthen the translation of BoP orientation into meaningful innovation outcomes.

Finally, the study extends network-based explanations of innovation by examining how cross-border B2B relationships between exporting firms and intermediaries shape social innovation in BoP markets. While prior studies have highlighted the importance of networks for social innovation (c.f. Phillips et al., 2015; Wegner et al., 2023), our findings specify how particular network competencies—marketing capabilities, cross-border resources, and strategic partnerships—contribute to socially oriented innovation within international business networks.

5.2. Managerial and policy implications

BoP markets are often impacted by systemic societal challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and social inequality. Social innovation is an avenue to advance progress in these societies (Babu & Pinstrip-Andersen, 2007; Crupi et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2019). Indeed, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals program (UNDP, 2015) encourages firms to look beyond economic benefits, and create social impact. Consistent with prior research (Ho & Yoon, 2022; Kanda et al., 2018), our study establishes the central role of intermediaries in fostering social innovation in BoP markets. Intermediaries not only support the long-term development of *network competence* among B2B firms, but they also help shape the broader ecosystems necessary for social innovation. Accordingly, firms and intermediaries should invest in developing long-term network competence to serve BoP markets effectively (De Silva et al., 2022; Ho & Yoon, 2022). In this regard, this study offers several managerial and policy implications that are relevant to managers of B2B firms, particularly those managing intermediary relationships in BoP markets.

First, when appointing intermediaries, firms should adopt a structured due diligence approach, identifying key capabilities and resources. In particular, firms need to ensure that the selected partners possess efficacious capabilities, or can be trained, to develop and execute

marketing activities that would effectively connect exporting firms to BoP markets. Intermediaries with strong marketing capabilities can help firms build competitive advantage (Herrera, 2015). A structured approach to intermediary selection would ensure that network partners serve as co-producers of market access and social impact, rather than as transactional distribution agents.

Second, our results show that exporters' cross-border resources enable intermediary effectiveness. Such support, which should be systematic rather than ad hoc, can include sharing coordination systems (e.g., CRM, mobile reporting tools), and standardizing forecasting and replenishment processes. Resources can also be in the form of providing training or capacity-building support to local intermediaries to strengthen these capabilities. Similarly, despite geographical distances, firms should provide appropriate cross-border resources, including infrastructure, technology, and operational processes, that enable intermediaries to perform their roles effectively. Thus, investments in digital platforms or communication tools may further support effective coordination.

Third, our findings attest to the need for close firm-intermediary strategic partnership. In essence, the collaboration should align the two parties' strategies on both economic gains and social impact. Strategic partnership development should aim to build trusting and strong relationships that foster collaborative ecosystems. This can include initiatives such as joint planning or sharing resources to expedite market entry. Strategic collaboration can also focus on establishing clear governance structures and accountability, or even conflict-resolution and ethical oversight mechanisms.

Fourth, relying on intermediaries is only a part of the solution to assist firms' endeavors to generate social innovation in BoP market. Because our mediation findings indicate that network competence influences social innovation through BoP orientation, firms must be BoP oriented in the first place, and then consciously strengthen this orientation internally. This means that firms should have a genuine interest in, and be willing to commit resources into, developing socially innovative products that would meet the needs of consumers in these markets.

Finally, research suggests that purpose-driven firms are more likely to mobilize resources and sustain long-term stakeholder engagement (Gartenberg et al., 2019). The moderation results demonstrate that purposeful societal goals strengthen the BoP orientation–social innovation link. Thus, firms should embed societal goals in their systems and incentives. For example, they can tie intermediary incentives to ethical marketing practices or explicitly measure the extent that their social innovations lead to desired social outcomes (e.g., poverty alleviation).

Additionally, our study offers two important implications for policymaking. First, for policymakers in the BoP markets, they need to develop effective programs to encourage investments in social innovation in their countries. Foreign firms can play a critical role in this aspect by actively participating in policy discussions and advocating for regulations and policies that support social innovation. This participation not only would help to create a more enabling and inclusive environment for enterprises, it would also minimize operating risks that are inherently present in BoP markets (Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024; Simanis, 2012). Second, for policymakers in exporters' country, they should provide BoP linkage creation opportunities to the exporting firms. For example, governments can provide financial support (such as tax subsidies) for attending the exporters-intermediary networking events. Policymakers in both BoP and exporters' country can also tie up to create smooth trade linkages and better knowledge exchange on the requirements of the BoP markets. They can also cooperate on intra- or inter-country public-private partnerships focused on BoP-aligned R&D or innovation grants.

6. Limitations and future research directions

This study is based on evidence from BoP markets, so findings cannot

be generalized to other context. BoP markets are not homogeneous. Cultural and political differences that exist across different BoP markets imply the need for different business models of social innovation (Basu et al., 2021; Cuypers et al., 2020). Future research could therefore explore cross-national comparisons among BoP markets to investigate these nuances. Similarly, studies can conduct comparative analyses of exporting firms from emerging versus advanced markets.

Building on the network perspective adopted in this study, future research could explicitly incorporate the views of a broader range of stakeholders, especially intermediaries, to further illuminate the complex interactions among the actors, resources, and activities. This would enrich our understanding of the relational dynamics that underpin social innovation in resource-constrained environments. In addition, future research can deep dive into our hypotheses via qualitative approaches for each BoP market-type. Such studies could help uncover context-specific insights and further refine the mechanisms through which intermediaries contribute to social innovation. In particular, ethnographic or longitudinal methods may deepen insights into the temporal evolution of network competence and BoP orientation.

This study did not account for the role of non-market actors, such as government agencies, NGOs, and trade or industry bodies. It is likely that these non-market actors would play a significant role in contributing to social innovation in BoP markets. Future research should incorporate these non-market stakeholders to shed light on how public-private collaborations contribute to socially innovative outcomes. Future studies could also consider examining the comparative efficacies of different functions supported by intermediaries such as logistics, marketing, and community engagement in driving social innovation. A more granular analysis could identify the differential strength of these intermediary capabilities in delivering successful outcomes in different

BoP contexts.

The linearity of our model, which posits that network competence leads to BoP orientation, represents a simplified structure rather than a fixed temporal order. We acknowledge that in practice, the development of BoP orientation and the cultivation of intermediaries may co-develop over time in a reciprocal or iterative fashion. We suggest this as an area for future research, particularly through longitudinal or process-based studies, to explore how, and under what conditions, BoP orientation and network competence may co-develop or relate directionally to each other.

Finally, our study is based on a small sample size, partly recruited through snowballing. Although power analysis indicates sufficient power for detecting medium-sized effects, smaller relationships may have gone undetected. We also acknowledge that snowball sampling may result in a network of firms with similar characteristics, reducing variability in key constructs. Accordingly, we suggest future studies should consider larger, more diverse samples with consistent sampling approaches.

Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

No conflict of interest

Right retention statement

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Appendix A. Select literature on intermediaries

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Bello and Williamson (1985) | Survey of firms identified from the Department of Commerce Directory | The study determines relationship between contractual agreements and the marketing strategies used by domestic suppliers and export intermediaries. An analysis is conducted on the impact of organising the export arrangement as a contractual, administrative, or traditional route using information gathered from a nationwide sample of export management organizations. The key significance of structure in the functioning of export channels is validated by testing relationship between export practises and channel structure. |
| Anderson and Coughlan (1987) | An empirical study by US semiconductor companies on the selection of distribution channels in unfamiliar international markets. They create scales to quantify variables using the interview data. Using these measurements, a logistic regression model is constructed. | The study determines the variables influencing the distribution channel type used in different international markets. The degree of transaction specificity of the assets in the distribution function and the degree of differentiation of the newly introduced product are related to the integration. There is proof that the product will be marketed via any existing channels in place. Moreover, American businesses appear to be more inclined to incorporate the distribution route in highly industrialised nations (Western Europe) than in more culturally dissimilar nations like South-east Asia and Japan. |
| Perry (1990) | Conceptual study | The paper discusses the evolution of export intermediaries and related theories. |
| Klein et al. (1990) | Data gathered from a set of Canadian export companies | The study finds that the market's capacity to restrain the opportunistic impulses of outside intermediaries is a crucial factor to consider when choosing a channel structure in a foreign nation. Different levels of forwards integration are viable options when the market cannot be trusted to enforce contractual agreements. In order to manage the inherent complexity and preserve flexibility of a foreign market with high environmental diversity, the firm may prefer to engage intermediaries. It has also been demonstrated that the number of channels, the usage of shared channels, and the country of destination influence the type of channel integration in global marketplaces. |
| Perry (1992) | Field study in defining the intermediaries | A field study of 35 US international trade intermediaries demonstrates that the intermediaries have altered the products they handle, the markets they serve, and the services they offer in response to different environmental circumstances. Additionally, they have shifted from operating as a pure export-management organization to operating as a trading company. |
| Karunaratna and Johnson (1997) | Conceptual proposition based study | Once a trading relationship has been established, an exporter can manage the relationship more effectively and lessen the chance of opportunistic behavior by monitoring the other party without using force. This will help the relationship function to the satisfaction of both sides. Increased oversight is also probably going to keep the parties' goals in line. Uncertain environmental |

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| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Bello and Williamson (1985) | Survey of firms identified from the Department of Commerce Directory | The study determines relationship between contractual agreements and the marketing strategies used by domestic suppliers and export intermediaries. An analysis is conducted on the impact of organising the export arrangement as a contractual, administrative, or traditional route using information gathered from a nationwide sample of export management organizations. The key significance of structure in the functioning of export channels is validated by testing relationship between export practises and channel structure. |
| Peng and Ilinitch (1998) | Conceptual proposition based study | conditions could, however, make it more difficult for the exporter to do precontractual screening. This study presents research agenda that incorporates the resource-based and transaction cost viewpoints. This agenda focuses on why manufacturers choose certain export intermediaries over others and why they choose them as their channel of choice. In this regard, study present testable propositions that a firm choses intermediary when markets are distant, and when intermediaries have higher knowledge of the markets, then intermediary performance will be higher. |
| Peng and York (2001) | Survey data from firms listed in Export Yellow pages | In the light of principal-agent conflicts and transaction cost limitations, the findings suggest that performance of export intermediaries is contingent upon their possession of distinctive, valuable, and difficult-to-imitate resources that aid in reducing the transaction and agency costs incurred by their customers. |
| Trabold (2002) | Using data from 20,000 French SMEs | This study presents data on the function of export intermediate companies from France. This research analyses two of Peng and Ilinitch (1998) transaction cost-based hypotheses about the role of export intermediaries. The proposition about product complexity is supported by the empirical evidence, while their proposition about familiarity and distance is only partially supported. |
| Ellis (2003) | Conceptual proposition based study | For exporting firm, intermediaries are an invaluable source of market intelligence and marketing technology. Though intermediaries may employ survival tactics that are not ideal from the manufacturer's perspective, they may do so since they are aware that their intermediary position may eventually become unnecessary. The catalytic and occasionally ambiguous function that intermediaries play in the economic development of host countries is identified in this article. |
| Ellis (2005) | Interviews of manufacturing clients of intermediaries | This study presents data showing a U-shaped relationship between manufacturers' assessments of intermediate performance and their propensity to end the arrangement. By doing this, the study offers evidence for the presence of the so-called "traders' dilemma," which is the higher risk of termination resulting from better intermediary performance. The traders' dilemma is robust under varied conditions of exchange uncertainty, cultural distance, and relationship age when intermediary success is judged in terms of driving demand, according to data gathered from manufacturer-clients. |
| Balabanis (2005) | Survey data of British export intermediaries in identifying different types of intermediary | The findings indicated that there are three different kinds of EIs: physical fulfillers, transaction creators, and full-service providers (FSPs). The number of countries covered, the physical presence in foreign markets, the distance to foreign markets, and the degree to which an EI assumes title of the commodities all affect the composition of these EIs' service mixes. The findings specifically demonstrated that "full service" EIs typically have a physical presence in international marketplaces, serve a greater number of nations, and service markets that are spread out geographically. |
| Peng et al. (2006) | U.S. firm data, employing a new archival database that covered 185,731 export transactions over a two-year period | We duplicated Trabold (2002) and enhances findings' applicability to a wider range of contexts and the validity and dependability of Peng and Ilinitch (1998) hypothesis. Overall, this study illustrates how cumulative empirical efforts might progress export strategy research, given the significance and dearth of replication work in the strategy field. |
| Hessels and Terjesen (2010) | Survey of Dutch SMEs | This article outlines the two options that small business owners and managers must decide between: (1) exporting or not, and (2) if the company does export, which export method to choose from—direct exporting to foreign clients or indirect exporting through another company as an intermediary. The owner/managers' perceptions of the growing global presence of their domestic competitors, customers' and suppliers' perceptions, and their perceptions of the increased use of foreign suppliers—better explain the decision to export than arguments, which center on the relative merits of direct versus indirect export modes, production costs, and capital availability. |
| Ahn et al. (2011) | Firm-level census of China's trade | This study shows that intermediaries are crucial to the facilitation of global trade. According to the model, enterprises will use productivity to determine their export mode endogenously, either directly or indirectly through an intermediary. Additionally, the model projects that in harder-to-enter marketplaces, intermediaries will play a comparatively larger role. |
| Ju et al. (2011) | Survey of firms extracted from export directory of China | This research finds that when distributor opportunism is increased by process control, while it is decreased by norm-based information exchange and market orientation. Furthermore, process control has a negative effect on opportunism at high levels of norm-based information exchange and market orientation. |
| Madsen et al. (2012) | A survey of small and medium-sized Norwegian export enterprises | The study offers that managers retain some degree of decision-making authority, which could be detrimental to export performance. The suggests that in their cooperation with international intermediaries, businesses should engage in task resolution more than decision-making. |

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| Bello and Williamson (1985) | Survey of firms identified from the Department of Commerce Directory | The study determines relationship between contractual agreements and the marketing strategies used by domestic suppliers and export intermediaries. An analysis is conducted on the impact of organising the export arrangement as a contractual, administrative, or traditional route using information gathered from a nationwide sample of export management organizations. The key significance of structure in the functioning of export channels is validated by testing relationship between export practises and channel structure. |
| Jia et al. (2014) | Case studies: Research on 14 MNC international purchasing office in China | The study highlights the unilinear and sequential nature of current global sourcing process models and allows international purchasing office to potentially advance through some stages faster than others, retrench (go back to lower stages), and even be withdrawn. Ultimately, study draw the conclusion that an international purchasing office stage is dictated by how strategically significant China is to the parent business. |
| Grazzi and Tomasi (2016) Wang and Gibson (2018) | Data obtained from a collaborative project of the World Bank Group and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Chinese customs data | The study validates that producers who export directly are more productive than those who use an export intermediary. The study explores tge differences between manufacturers who export directly and those who export through trade intermediaries. We find that only enterprises with the highest quality-adjusted productivity levels choose to export directly, when we model trade intermediaries as increasing marginal costs while decreasing fixed costs of exporting. The model indicates that direct exporters are typically larger and charge greater prices for their commodities under specific parameter limits. Using Chinese customs data, findings confirm that direct exporters do indeed demand higher pricing for their goods. |
| Medin (2021) | Using panel data from trade transactions in Norway | The study shows that most manufacturing producers engaged in international trade use these brokers and that they typically handle substantial trade values on behalf of several producers. The research conducted indicates that the percentage of a producer's market-specific trade that is self-declared instead of handled by brokers increases with traded value. This holds true even after taking into consideration observed and unobserved variables at the producer, country, and product levels and is compatible with theoretical models on trade intermediates. The fact that the results for importing and exporting are identical indicates that brokers assist with both types of business. |
| Efrat and Øyna (2021) | A survey of international venture managers and in-depth interviews with 16 top export managers, | The study finds that SMEs can improve affective trust while reducing disputes in their relationship management by integrating interaction-orientation constructs. Additionally, calculative trust acts as a mediator between the effects of task conflicts and emotional conflicts on SMEs' performance, highlighting the advantages of striking a balance between formal and relational governance. |
| Virtanen et al. (2022) | Systematic review | A systematic review identifies three themes (1) What are intermediaries? (2) When ought one to employ intermediaries? and (3) How intermediaries function and grow? The analysis reveals that the literature to date has been sparse and dispersed. Scholars are urged to take into account the function of intermediaries in a larger context in which intermediated transactions occur not only in dyadic relationships but also in a larger networks. |

Data Availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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