


Presenting an Export Market-Oriented Model On Competitive Intelligence in the Age of Digital Economy: A Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to develop a model of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the era of the digital economy.

Method: This study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing grounded theory as the research method. Sampling was conducted purposefully and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, involving a total of 15 managers and experts from selected exporting companies. The systematic research process comprised open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, facilitated by strategies such as analysis, questioning, comparison, reminders, schemas, and paradigms. During the coding process, revisions were made, and classifications were validated through feedback from the participants.

Findings: The findings revealed the paradigmatic pattern of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy including six main categories of causal conditions, context, phenomenon or central category, intervening conditions, strategies and the consequences. Causal conditions have three sub-categories of learning abilities promotion of

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How to Cite: Mohammadi, M.S., Ghasemi, B., Sarmadsaeedi, S.(2025). Presenting an Export Market-Oriented Model On Competitive Intelligence in the Age of Digital Economy: A Grounded Theory Study, International Journal of Digital Content Management (IJDCM), 5(10), 49-68. DOI: 10.22054/dcm.2023.69511.1146

customer-oriented culture, knowledge of export technology and R&D processes and identification of export market needs; background conditions include three sub-categories of competitive thinking, competitive export processes (technical evaluation) and competitive governance; intervening conditions include three sub-categories of market technical structure (new technologies), environmental uncertainty and global markets (export risks); the central phenomenon has three sub-categories of value chain (reward strategy), human resource empowerment and employee training (export intelligence); The strategies include three sub-categories of competitive value creation, development of export competitiveness and strategic evaluation of resources and competitive agility and strategic entrepreneurship; The results include three sub-categories of developing entrepreneurial activities, competitive advantage and promoting innovation and dynamic export capabilities.

Conclusion: Based on the results, successful implementation of the export market orientation model, grounded in competitive intelligence, requires managers of exporting companies to develop a deeper understanding of the export market. This can be achieved by allocating greater effort to market-oriented activities. Furthermore, by emphasizing competitive intelligence, these companies can improve the perception of their services and create a positive association with their brand in the minds of international customers.

Keywords: Digital economy, Exports, Marketing, Orientation, Export market, Competitive intelligence

Introduction

The last decade has differed significantly from previous ones due to globalization and heightened business competition. Consumer product markets, industrial goods and services markets, and resource markets, such as those for capital, materials, and technology, have become highly integrated at the global level (Aligholi & Fatemi, 2017; Grassi, 2024). The orientation of the export market through the creation of new business opportunities and development is necessary for the economic growth processes of countries. It contributes to economic growth by fostering knowledge creation and transfer, increasing competition, and enhancing diversity (Cadogan et al., 2012; Van den Boom, 2023).

To ensure security and increase sales volume, industrial market players face growing competitive pressure, insufficient resources, and a lack of management commitment in export markets. Since international activities are vital for company performance, businesses engaged in export face the challenge of designing and implementing export strategies that can address the uncertainties of rapidly changing markets (Boikanyo et al., 2016; Balio & Casais, 2021). Furthermore, globalization in recent years has prompted commercial companies to seek new opportunities based on competitive intelligence in international markets, alongside their domestic and traditional markets. Export managers play a crucial role by enabling organizations to respond strategically to changes, ensuring alignment with the general operating environment, and influencing export performance (Eti et al., 2024).

Companies explore various methods to sell goods and services worldwide to maximize their profits (Wirtz, 2021; Erdmann, 2024). Exporting allows companies to offer products in foreign markets with minimal involvement in local activities. However, successful export development, proper market entry, and sustainability in international markets require a specific and stable export strategy. Given the importance of export activities, companies must identify the factors influencing their export performance to survive and succeed (Daries et al., 2020). The degree of a company's success in exporting is measured by its export performance (Gallego & Casillas, 2014; He et al., 2023).

The success of exporting organizations in the international market is not accidental. On one hand, competition, and on the other, continuous changes create complex conditions, underscoring the necessity of a long-term strategy and plan. A prerequisite for successful exporting is a well-structured long-term strategy, which includes the correct orientation

toward export markets (Julian et al., 2014). Export market orientation is defined as a competitive action within the market (Kayabasi & Mtetwa, 2016; Zarinkamar et al., 2024).

In this context, competitive intelligence has emerged as a critical management concept intertwined with the culture of export businesses (Håkansson & Nelke, 2015; Cham et al., 2022), providing competitive advantages. In today's fast-paced markets, relying on outdated information leads to reduced insight and lost opportunities (Kotler & Keller, 2010; Nazari Hosseinabad et al., 2024). Only organizations with greater insight and intelligence are likely to achieve success and prosperity in business. Information is one of the most vital strategic assets and marketing tools, and gathering and analyzing data about competitors is crucial for strategy formulation (Anshari et al., 2023).

Building capacity for export market orientation requires providing necessary training and skills with a market-oriented approach while fostering the growth of export companies to meet societal needs. Simultaneously, overcoming obstacles and creating favorable conditions for service activities are essential for the development and growth of export businesses. The institutional framework significantly affects export company development by influencing foreign companies' effective behavior, necessitating investigation and analysis (Håkansson & Nelke, 2015; Loi et al., 2022).

In today's information-rich world, gathering vast amounts of data is no longer sufficient. Instead, leveraging information and transforming it into export market orientation to guide organizational decisions and enhance competitive intelligence has become a priority. This study examines export market orientation from managers' perspectives, emphasizing how digital marketing strategies and communication between exporters and business partners result from competitive intelligence. It highlights the importance of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence within the digital economy, a key factor influencing export success (Kayabasi & Mtetwa, 2016; Schramm et al., 2023).

Considering the nature of export companies, their success is essential for survival in competitive markets. Export success is often defined by various aspects of export performance, yet a comprehensive model incorporating export market orientation typologies and competitive intelligence within the digital economy remains unexplored. To address this theoretical gap, this study aims to propose effective solutions for

enhancing competitive intelligence in the digital economy and seeks to answer the following question: What is the proposed model of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the digital economy era among sample exporting companies?

Literature Review

Export market orientation: the methodology of creative marketing strategies is carried out with export market analyzes based on customer orientation and competitors' activities, but less is used of organizational missions and values that change over time and in a dynamic international environment. In such a situation, the strategy is no longer deploying a series of fixed activities to create added value and profitability of the organization, so the current successful export companies need to follow the goal of the export market orientation strategy beyond the requirements of market changes and paying attention to the customer-oriented process. (Sun, 2023).

Therefore, conditions should be provided so that organizations will be able to create vital values and deliver them to their customers, and business organizations should be able to adapt to changes in the future conditions in terms of values. Therefore, the traditional emphasis on export market orientation helps managers to ensure that the company is aware of the current and future needs of customers and can work to respond to these needs (Pakparvar et al., 2020; Pascucci et al., 2023).

Competitive intelligence: Managers usually use objective criteria as reference points for competitive evaluation. Competitive capabilities are defined as the ability to connect organizational assets with each other and expand them in an effective and profitable way. (Ghaffari et al., 2012; Homburg & Wielgos, 2022). Competitive intelligence is a complex set of knowledge, skills and abilities that are located in all levels of the company's business processes. The key role of competitive capabilities in a company is to try to achieve a competitive advantage and superior export performance. Creating value through competitive service intelligence often requires the company to anticipate future customer needs. In order to provide superior value by the company to the customers, the company needs to anticipate environmental changes to develop strategic performance. However, competitive intelligence represents an additional tool by which companies can help improve their market and business performance, which in turn it can possibly contribute to competitive advantages in today's business environment. Many export companies

compete based on services and not based on physical products (Hassani & Mosconi, 2021). In this regard, Pakparvar et al. (2020) also examined the impact of export marketing capabilities on export performance: modeling the role of ineffective competition showed that a strong ability to respond to export markets is essential and a high ability to introduce new products in export markets is persistent. They are not useful for sub-Saharan African markets, because export performance outputs depend on the degree of inefficient competition.

Pham et al. (2017) also investigated the use of dynamic export capabilities for competitive advantage and performance consequences in Chinese export companies. The results showed that the impact of adaptability on competitive advantage decreases under higher competitive conditions. However, for unpredictability, this effect becomes negative.

From the study of theoretical foundations, it can be concluded that the lack of use of exploratory research methods in the field of digital marketing, as well as the use of qualitative research methods such as the use of contextual theory, ethnography, case study, phenomenology, discourse analysis, etc. It was another case that directed the current research. The digital marketing research that has been done so far has usually been done using quantitative methods through data collection with questionnaires to test non-native and foreign theories, and as a result, there is a lack of domestic/indigenous research based on the hypothesis developed in target communities. In relation to the subject of the present research, there was a lack of such a research that expresses positive and negative views side by side regarding the role and function of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the digital age. Therefore, due to the lack of a coherent and practical model regarding the determination of effective factors in the orientation of the export market and competitive intelligence in the age of digital economy, the researchers used the grounded theory qualitative research method, so that with a systematic analysis of data, an inductive theory in a real realm could be reached. Therefore, the need to know the pattern of export market orientation in this field is undeniable. On the other hand, in the current research the presentation of export market orientation model based on competitive intelligence has been evaluated in the relevant literature with a foundational data approach using coding method with a view to filling this gap.

Method

The current research is fundamental in purpose and qualitative in terms of data collection methodology. The grounded theory method has been employed (Arastehfard et al., 2024). The research community included experts in the fields of digital marketing and business, as well as experts in digital marketing and export, and managers of sample exporting companies in Tehran. The sampling method was non-random, and the number of samples was not predetermined; the sampling process continued during data analysis until theoretical saturation was achieved.

The primary data collection tool was interviews with experts, specialists, and industry practitioners. Using an interview protocol, interviews were conducted with a sample of automotive industry professionals, and the necessary information for the research was extracted. A total of 15 people were interviewed; however, theoretical saturation occurred by the 11th interview and was further confirmed through the 15th.

Data analysis was based on the grounded theory approach, utilizing coding and categorization. In the initial phase of the research, information was gathered through open interviews with managers from the sample exporting companies. Observing the behavior of experts and industry practitioners provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Data, including interviews, documents, notes, and audio files, were entered into software and coded at the initial stage.

Three stages of coding—open, axial, and selective—were performed on the data. Initially, the data was read line by line, and open codes (using the participants' own words) were extracted. These codes were then compared with previous codes, and conceptually similar codes were grouped into the same category, leading to the gradual formation of classes. The levels were further compared and refined: similar levels were merged, while some levels were divided into two or more categories as needed. In some cases, codes were reallocated from one level to another until a central category was identified. Finally, based on this process of coding and categorization, the conceptual model of the research was developed.

Findings

The communication process in coding is based on the expansion of one of the classes, such as the one chosen as the central class in the current

research, that is, the orientation model of the export market based on competitive intelligence in the sample exporting companies, which originates from causal conditions and affecting the process and strategy leads to the final result. Selective coding also revealed the relationship between classes. However, after conducting scientific interviews with scientific and executive experts in the organization, the pattern of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy emerged in sample exporting companies based on the Foundation's data method. In this model, the categories were placed in the following six groups: causal conditions, context, phenomenon or central category, intervening conditions, strategies and consequences. In the qualitative phase of this research, interview and document collection tools were used to collect information. Kappa index was used to confirm the validity of the analysis. Based on the opinion of two authors, the Kappa index was 0.970, which is confirmed. Therefore, the qualitative analysis is confirmed.

Causal conditions

Causal conditions include cases of categories that directly affect the orientation of the export market based on competitive intelligence in the age of digital economy, or these factors create and develop the phenomenon. In this research, the three categories of learning abilities (promotion of customer-oriented culture), knowledge of export technology and R&D processes, and identifying the needs of the export market are experimental factors, which can create causal conditions for export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy. The categories related to causal conditions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. causal categories (main, secondary)

The main category	Conceptual codes	Secondary codes
Causal condition	Learning abilities (promoting customer-oriented culture)	Coherent learning network
		Favorable environmental advertising
		Use of social networks
		Optimal learning development
	Knowledge of export technology and R&D processes	Long-term activities in knowledge and technology
		Finding potential applications for achievements

	Identifying the needs of the export market	Increasing export competitiveness
		Establishment of research and development units
		Evaluation of competing companies
		Increasing competition in the export market
		Identification of product standards in the target market
		Responding to needs

Infrastructure conditions

Infrastructure conditions represent a specific set of characteristics related to the phenomenon, which generally refer to the place of events and related events. Contextual features include factors without which the realization of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence is not possible in organizations and provide the context of special conditions in which strategies for administration, control and response to the phenomenon are made. These conditions are made up of a set of concepts, categories and Infrastructure variables (Mohammadi, 2013). In this research, competitive thinking, competitive export processes (technical evaluation) and competitive dominance are the main Infrastructure factors of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy, which is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Infrastructure categories (main, secondary)

The main category	Conceptual codes	Secondary codes
Infrastructure conditions	Competitive thinking	Development of innovative ideas
		Technological infrastructure
		Active participation of stakeholders
	Export competitive processes (technical evaluation)	Development of competitive standards
		Attention to external restrictions
		Sharing favorable information with competitors
		Group participation with competitors in the export market
	Competitive dominance	Assessments of internal strengths and weaknesses
		Using the potentials available in the market
		Market share
		Competitive model

Intervening conditions

In this research, three categories of market technical structure (new technologies), environmental uncertainty and global markets (export risks) are considered as the categories of intervening conditions according to the orientation of the export market based on competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. intervening categories (main, secondary)

The main category	Conceptual codes	Secondary codes
Intervening conditions	Technical structure of the market (new technologies)	Manpower capability
		Change in required skills and expertise
		Relationships based on trust
		Strategic vision
		The type of technology that matches the need for new product development
	Environmental uncertainty	Economic factors
		Political factors
		social factors
	Global markets (export risks)	A lot of changes in the rules
		Inconsistency of rules
		Currency fluctuation
		Sanctions
		Lack of support from managers
	Reduction of interdepartmental cooperation	

Main phenomenon

The phenomenon in question must be central, that is, all other main categories can be related to it and appear repeatedly in the data. In the sense that in all or almost all cases, there are signs that point to that concept. The central phenomenon refers to the idea or phenomenon that is the basis and center of the process to which all other main categories are related. In this

research, three categories of value chain(reward strategy), human resources empowerment and employee training (export intelligence) are considered as the central categories of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. core categories (main, secondary)

The main category	Conceptual codes	Secondary codes
The central category	Value chain (reward strategy)	adaptability
		Innovation
		Advancing in a competitive environment
		Diversity in the competitive environment
		Flexibility with competitive advantage
	Empowering human resources	Development of knowledge capital in the export market
		Export knowledge transfer
		Employee Creativity
		Empowering human resources
	Employee training (export intelligence)	Adequate technical knowledge and knowledge
		Positioning strategy
		Export entrepreneurship education
		Educational evaluation
		Improving the place of education in entrepreneurial activities
		Strategic thinking in domain of export

Strategies

In this research, three categories of competitive value creation, development of export competitiveness and strategic evaluation of resources and competitive agility and strategic entrepreneurship are considered as strategies based on the core categories of export market orientation according to competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. category of strategies (action/reaction, main, secondary)

The main category	Conceptual codes	Secondary codes
	Competitive value creation	Providing new products and services
		Introducing new production methods
		Supplying products to new export markets
		Access to new suppliers of raw materials

Strategies	Development of export competitiveness and strategic assessment of resources	Choosing efficient advertising channels
		Establishment of a customer club
		New organizational structures in the export market
	Competitive agility and strategic entrepreneurship	To acquire knowledge
		Evaluating market changes through intra-company collaboration
		Flexibility
		Responding to changes in markets
		New features and services

Consequences

According to open coding, the concepts related to the consequences of the model have been extracted, then according to the back and forth movement between themes and concepts, the main categories have been extracted and named, and accordingly, the consequences in three sections related to the development of entrepreneurial activities, competitive advantage and promotion of innovation and dynamic export capabilities are classified as the consequences of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy. Table 6 deals with categories and concepts related to outcomes.

Table 6. consequence category (main, secondary)

The main category	Secondary codes	Conceptual codes
Consequence	Development of entrepreneurial activities	risk taking
		Export integrated marketing
		Making a distinction
	Competitive Advantage	Identification of entrepreneurial opportunities
		Consistent competitive measures
		Improvement of responsiveness
	Promotion of innovation and dynamic export capabilities	International experience
		Focusing on value-added activities
		Participation in the global market
		Management orientation and commitment
	Market orientation	

Paradigmatic model

The paradigm model of this research was designed based on the paradigm model of Strauss and Corbin. Despite these factors and conditions, the export market orientation model and process based on competitive intelligence in the digital economy era was designed in sample exporting companies in Tehran. Explaining the factors causing this issue has also been the main concern of this research. The research paradigm model is shown in Figure 1.

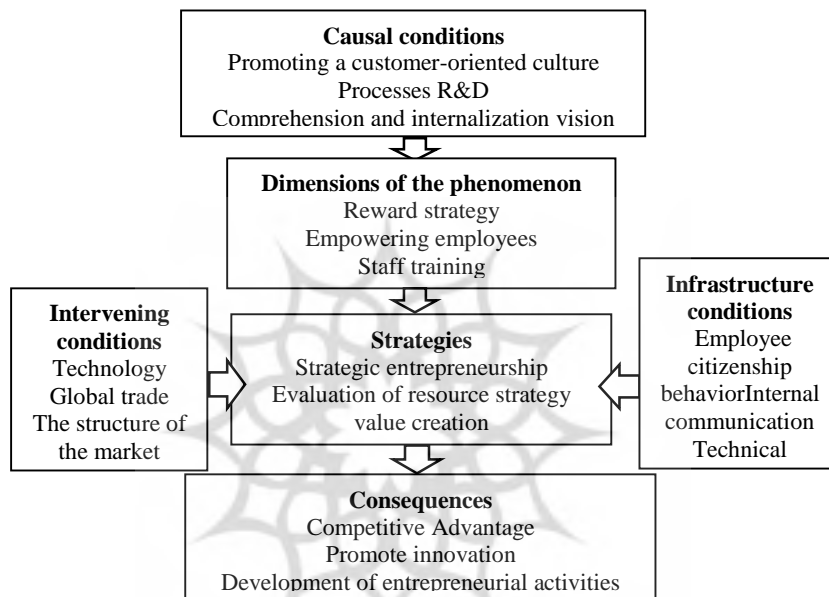


Figure 1. Research paradigm model

The paradigm model of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the age of digital economy in sample export companies of Tehran, includes six main categories of causal conditions, Infrastructure conditions, phenomenon or central category, intervening conditions, strategies and consequences, as well as 18 sub-categories. The causal conditions have three sub-categories of learning abilities (promotion of customer-oriented culture), knowledge of export technology and R&D processes, and identification of export market needs. Background conditions include three sub-categories of competitive thinking, competitive export processes (technical assessment) and competitive dominance. Intervening conditions include three sub-categories of market technical structure (new technologies), environmental uncertainty and global markets (export risks). The central phenomenon refers to the idea

or phenomenon that is the basis and center of the process to which all other main categories are related. In this research, the three categories of value chain (reward strategy), human resource empowerment and employee training (export intelligence) are the central categories of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the era of digital economy. Strategies include three sub-categories of competitive value creation, development of export competitiveness and strategic evaluation of resources and competitive agility and strategic entrepreneurship, and outcomes include three sub-categories of development of entrepreneurial activities, competitive advantage and promotion of innovation and dynamic export capabilities.

Conclusion

The final model demonstrates that a holistic perspective and attention to various aspects of export market orientation based on competitive intelligence in the digital economy, including causal, contextual, and intervening conditions, are essential. The current research aims to provide a model of export market orientation grounded in competitive intelligence for the digital economy, utilizing the grounded theory approach. The research results include the presentation of causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening conditions, central categories, consequences, and strategies for the development of marketing education, presented as a paradigm model in line with grounded theory.

Unlike previously identified models, this research model is not limited to export market orientation alone; it also incorporates attitudes alongside strategies relevant to the export field. Furthermore, this model imposes no specific constraints on the types of export market orientations that may be identified in future studies. In this regard, Pham et al. (2017) concluded that entrepreneurial orientation in the export market has three main consequences: individual, organizational, and social. Similarly, Hassani & Moscani (2021) highlighted that export companies contribute to ecosystem strengthening and achieving competitive advantage. Ghaffari et al. (2012) emphasized the role of competitive intelligence and its influence on export performance.

Managers should strive to adapt their services and educational frameworks to contemporary needs and changes. By enhancing value creation, they can promote competitive intelligence in relation to their services and foster a shift in managerial thinking. Furthermore, they should create an environment where risk-taking becomes a cultural norm.

Encouraging a spirit of risk-taking among employees across all departments inspires creativity and innovation, enabling them to pursue new market opportunities consistently.

In the context of export market orientation, adapting export marketing strategies—such as tailoring products to the preferences of foreign customers—enables exporters to not only meet these preferences but also establish a competitive position in the market. Therefore, instead of prioritizing low-cost strategies, managers should focus on adaptive strategies. This shift is crucial because many global manufacturers are reducing prices, creating intense competition. For instance, dried fruit companies must adopt adaptive marketing strategies to stabilize their position in the global market and increase their market share.

Export company managers are encouraged to effectively allocate managerial and financial resources. Committing organizational resources to the export market fosters the development of innovative ideas for products, services, or processes, which, in turn, enhance customer value and create situational competitive advantages for companies. Additionally, alignment and commitment among export markets are best achieved through a customer-oriented approach. By employing innovative solutions, sample exporting companies can better respond to the needs and preferences of foreign customers. Managers of sample exporting companies are advised to focus on target markets when developing new products, ensuring these products align with those of competitors. Extensive marketing campaigns should be conducted to introduce as many new brand names as possible in the export market, thereby strengthening brand recognition and market presence.

Considering the application of scientific methods in digital export marketing, it is possible to identify the cultural, economic, political, and legal environments of target markets in order to reduce risks. This can be achieved by establishing and activating a market research and digital marketing department within the production-export unit, which will help provide competitive prices, efficient distribution channels, and local distribution networks. Additionally, identifying competitors, determining the most effective sales promotion methods, understanding consumers' preferences in target markets, and investigating the potential for modifying products to meet market demands are crucial steps.

Moreover, creating opportunities for long-term investments in marketing and advertising through short-term export system programs, increasing government support for sending marketing delegations to

different markets, organizing specialized marketing conferences and seminars, and inviting business delegations from potential export markets are essential. Holding international exhibitions and facilitating a permanent exhibition of Iranian products abroad, in collaboration with relevant organizations, is another important avenue to explore. The Trade Development Organization, the Chamber of Commerce, and relevant governmental bodies can assist in providing advertising opportunities in foreign mass media, particularly through consulates and export-related organizations. The establishment of postal facilities to quickly send samples to foreign markets should also be prioritized in order to boost exports.

It is recommended that companies expand their innovation strategies based on customer value creation for new products and services. Financing should be sourced from both domestic and foreign markets. By supporting company units and taking the initiative in key decisions, export effectiveness can be enhanced. Managers are advised to strengthen innovative processes and encourage employee participation in group work, facilitating the exchange of creative ideas and stimulating innovation. This collaborative environment will generate new knowledge and ideas that can be shared and implemented in the value creation process, ultimately empowering employees.

Exemplary export company managers should focus on designing cooperation mechanisms, promoting a culture of teamwork, fostering collaborative thinking, and creating a friendly atmosphere among employees. The stronger the organizational infrastructure, the more effective the company will be in supporting the innovative process, leading to the creation, sharing, and use of ideas that add value to the export market.

Paying attention to the development and strengthening of necessary innovation infrastructures, such as network communications, document management systems, databases, and information retrieval engines, is crucial. Additionally, integrating and updating the organization's information systems to facilitate employees' access to export-related knowledge using new information technologies and communication tools is essential for improving innovative capabilities and value creation in the export market.

To enhance the information capabilities within the export sector, company managers should consider the opinions and suggestions of employees, leveraging their experience in creating, developing, and

maintaining consistent export effectiveness. Achieving higher levels of innovation performance in domestic markets should also be prioritized in this regard.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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How to Cite: Mohammadi, M.S., Ghasemi, B., Sarmadsaeedi, S.(2025). Presenting an Export Market-Oriented Model On Competitive Intelligence in the Age of Digital Economy:A Grounded Theory Study, International Journal of Digital Content Management (IJDCM), 5(10), 49-68. DOI: 10.22054/dcm.2023.69511.1146



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