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## THE IMPACT OF ICT USE IN PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES ON EXPORT PERFORMANCE: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

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#### JEL Codes:

M31, P45,

The integration of ICT into promotion activities in international markets where competition is intense may offer great advantages to the enterprises on the basis of brand and cost. From this point of view the objective of the current study is to empirically examine (i) the impact of the use of ICT in promotional activities on brand advantage and cost advantage and (ii) the impact of brand advantage and cost advantage on export performance. The data that were collected from 188 exporter companies from Turkey with the help of a structured questionnaire were statistically analyzed by using the SmartPLS 3.0 software. The results reveal that promotional activities using ICT have a strong and positive effect on brand advantage and low cost advantage, while there is no significant direct effect on export performance. The results also reveal that brand advantage and low cost advantage significantly affect export performance.

## TUTUNDURMA FAALİYETLERİNDE BİT KULLANIMININ İHRACAT PERFORMANSINA ETKİSİ: AMPİRİK BİR ARAŞTIRMA

### ÖZ

#### Anahtar Kelimeler:

Bilgi İletişim Teknolojileri

Marka Avantajı

İhracat Performansı

Tutundurma

#### JEL Kodları:

M31, P45

Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerinin rekabetin yoğun olduğu uluslararası pazarlarda tutundurma faaliyetlerine entegrasyonu, işletmelere marka ve maliyet bazında büyük avantajlar sağlayabilir. Bu bakış açısından hareketle bu çalışmanın amacı; (i) BİT'in tutundurma faaliyetlerinde kullanılmasının marka avantajı ve maliyet avantajı üzerindeki etkisini ve (ii) marka avantajı ve maliyet avantajının ihracat performansı üzerindeki etkisini ampirik olarak incelemektir. Türkiye'den 188 ihracatçı firmadan yapılandırılmış anket yardımıyla toplanan veriler SmartPLS 3.0 yazılımı kullanılarak istatistiksel olarak analiz edilmiştir. Sonuçlar, bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerini kullanan tutundurma faaliyetlerinin marka avantajı ve düşük maliyet avantajı üzerinde güçlü ve olumlu bir etkiye sahip olduğunu, ancak ihracat performansı üzerinde doğrudan önemli bir etkisinin olmadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuçlar ayrıca marka avantajının ve düşük maliyet avantajının ihracat performansını önemli ölçüde etkilediğini ortaya koymuştur.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The world economy has shown major developments and changes in the process from the existence of humanity to nowadays. The world economy, which had a more conservative structure in the past, has become more integrated and globalized today. Particularly international trade is in a great integration development. It can be mentioned that there are many factors in this development and change in the economy. These factors include supply-demand equilibrium, developing logistics system, prospering level of welfare, developments in technology and information and communication technologies etc. These developments and changes offer many advantages and opportunities to enterprises. Enterprises that develop strategies by foreseeing these developments and changes will have achieved a remarkable economic performance.

The fact that these developments in the internet and information and communication technologies (ICT) have made a great contribution to the internationalization of enterprises is a generally accepted approach. For example, besides ICT has accelerated the internationalization of enterprises, it has also developed tools for enterprises with complex operational structures to communicate more effectively with their customers (Bell and Loane 2010). Moreover, it provides new ways for enterprises to conduct their business, has an exchange of ideas and information and transfer them (Gilmore & Pine, 2000; Weill & Vitale, 2001). Therefore, these developments have become an important parameter in the success and sustainability of enterprises. Enterprises that are able to make use of the advantages and opportunities in ICT will make as important contributions to their own future as possible. This is because the right ICT strategy will improve enterprise performance as well as competitive advantage.

With the development of ICT, there have been significant changes in the habits of consumers and marketing activities of companies (M.-C. Alarcón-del-Amo, Criado, & Josep, 2017). ICT is especially used in e-marketing to create value for customers, build customer relationships and manage stakeholders to benefit them (Strauss, El-Ansary, & Frost, 2006). For example, many enterprises with the necessary

ICT infrastructure are able to conduct real-time marketing activities for their customers. Additionally, it provides the advantage of gathering intelligence about international markets and promoting customers in new markets at low costs (Quelch & Klein, 1996). Nowadays, enterprises of all sizes understand the importance of ICT in marketing and use it at various levels.

Marketing with ICT has led to significant changes in the promotion mix. It provides an indirect contribution to the development of promotion activities such as advertising, direct sales and personal selling, in particular. ICT is able to have a significant impact on the digitalization of advertising, efficiency of ICT tools in personal sales and variation of communication tools in direct marketing. Thus, the development of promotional tools can increase the effectiveness and productiveness of promotion activities. Furthermore, promotion activities increase the performance of the enterprise by ensuring that the business knows the market well and establishes healthier and stronger relationships with customers (Hao & Song, 2016). Therefore, this situation increases export performance and keeps promotion costs to a minimum. In the literature, the effect of ICT on the enterprise's competitive advantage and export performance is addressed, however, there is almost no empirical study of the effect of ICT-based promotion mix on competitive advantage and export performance. Therefore, this study will make important contributions to filling the gap in the literature. This study will contribute to the literature particularly in this matter.

In this study, it will be examined (i) whether the use of ICT in promotion activities has an effect on the brand and cost advantage of the enterprise and export performance, (ii) whether competitive advantage has an effect on export performance. In this way, a contribution will be made to the enrichment of the literature on this subject both theoretically and empirically. First, the relationship between variables in the proposed hypotheses will be supported with the relevant literature by creating a conceptual framework, which will be followed by providing the details of the research methodology. Finally, the results of the data analysis will be presented and the findings will be interpreted and discussed.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Information and Communication Technologies

In addition to being a concept as old as human history, communication has never lost its value for human beings. The fact that communication is the most important tool enabling people to understand each other and to provide information is the most important reason for that. Soon after the invention of electricity and electromechanical power, the technological factor in communication between people has created great changes (Vural & Sabuncuoğlu, 2008). These developments have increased the interest of scientists in ICT. In the literature, the concept of information and communication technologies has been defined in many different ways. UNESCO (2006) describes ICT as technologies used in the transmission, storage, sharing and exchange of information. Erdoğan and Bilir (2002) described ICT as the whole of technology through which information is transmitted via spreading networks. Other communication activities such as Internet service, IT equipment, network-based information services, media and broadcasting are included in the scope of ICT (UNEC 1999).

Nowadays ICT progresses rapidly and has a great impact on the applications of the digitalized business world. By means of ICT, enterprises can innovate their products and services, publish information and news related to enterprise in digital media, develop creative and flexible business strategies and take many more actions (Weill, Subramani, & Broadbent, 2002). Furthermore, ICT is the most important tool that can be used to maintain and strengthen the strategic competitive advantage in a constantly changing and developing business world (Mastilo, 2017). Bhatt and Grover (2005) suggested that advanced ICT features give the enterprise the skill to protect against threats and to intervene rapidly in assessing the opportunities that will arise. This skill allows enterprises to take numerous actions, such as researching, assimilating and analyzing the information about what opportunities it can create with available resources. However, it has been observed in the studies and investigations that while many entrepreneurs from the business world try to take advantage of digital technologies, many other enterprises lag behind in terms of digitalized modern business activities. For instance, it has been found in a study that

digitalized economies on the basis of ICT accounted for more than 22% of the global modern business world. Therefore, in the light of these results, it can be concluded that ICT cannot fully integrate and influence the modern business world (Mastilo, 2017).

The use of ICT also has many direct and indirect positive effects on operational performance. According to Sugiharto (2009), ICT plays a major role in increasing the enterprise's market share, improving the products according to the needs and requests of the customers and diversifying the products. Solomon Brothers analysts have concluded that ICT skills are the most important parameter that differentiates the more profitable bank from other banks (Nolan, 1994). Therefore, this result shows the impact of ICT on operational performance. The effect of ICT investments on business performance is directly proportionate to the mentality of the enterprises. It can be said that if enterprises accept ICT as an impact all by itself, this may make it very difficult for them to get a return on their investments. If ICT resources and skills can be integrated into the business system as a combination of business processes, then it creates an impact on business performance and creates value.

In conclusion, it can be said that ICT has a great impact both on creating competitive advantage and performance parameters such as operational profit and sustainability. It can be said that ICT will be the most important factor that can determine the existence of enterprises in the future especially in the digital conversion process of Industry 4.0. In addition, it will provide a strategic competitive advantage to enterprises in the business world where competition is intense.

## **2.2. Promotional Activities**

Promotion is used by enterprises as a tool of communication and interaction with the customer. Enterprise transmit information about its products or services through promotional activities. The promotion mix of enterprises consists of activities of advertising, sales promotion, public relations, personal sales and direct marketing. According to the strategies of the enterprise, interaction with a customer is provided by promotion mix, the customer value is delivered and the relationship is

developed (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). In this interaction, enterprises take on roles such as informing, listening and answering questions as well as assuring customers. Moreover, these roles provide a great contribution to the development of customer relationships.

Advertising is one of the most powerful tools to build awareness about a company, product, service or idea. Advertising can be defined as a non-personal form of communication made by a particular person or organization using mass media for payment to impress or persuade the audience (Wells, Burnett, & Moriarty, 1998). According to Argan (2002), advertising can be defined as the promotion of goods/services or ideas through mass media in order to achieve consumer satisfaction and advertiser's objectives as to provide the persuasive communication. Ads on the web can be displayed on the company's own site as well as on other sites that are not owned by the enterprise. The most popular of these are advertising panels such as banners, Google AdWords.

The concept of public relations is that, in order to create a good corporate image, enterprises come up with positive news and that they can direct negative news about the business in the right direction. The audience that enterprises desire to impress with the good news is their customers, partners and other stakeholders. While the public relations are treated like a step-child of marketing in the past, today, understanding how effective its impact on society has caused this perception to change (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013).

In direct marketing, instead of promoting to all customer mass, by identifying their characteristics and needs, promotion is made to a certain target audience who may need a product/service or has a higher purchasing potential (Ling & Li, 1998). Therefore, direct marketing appears in the form of peer-to-peer and duplex communication with the customer. In recent years, it is seen that direct marketing is increasingly used on the basis of informatics. Electronic channels such as the Internet, social media, e-mail and TV are the best examples of information-based direct marketing activities.

Personal selling is, in order to realize sales, the technique whereby the salesperson talks face-to-face with potential customers, talks with them and achieves results (Mucuk, 2012). Personal selling is a very effective promotion method because of its advantage of instant analysis of the customer's emotional state and reactions. Therefore, it has a flexible structure that can be shaped according to the needs of the customer. The final promotion tool is sales development. Sales development is not a method that is used by enterprise continuously during promotion activities. In general, these activities are those realized in demand decrease, in season-ends or in certain time periods.

### **2.3. Export Performance**

One of the most important steps that entrepreneurs considering internationalization should take is export. Advantages of exports such as contribution to the national economy, creating employment, the role of the increase in sales, decreasing domestic market loyalty and providing foreign exchange inflow are the most important reasons increasing the interest of enterprises in this subject. Therefore, a good export performance makes a significant contribution to the development process of financial, managerial and other capabilities of enterprises.

It has been observed in the literature that researchers and scientists do not clearly agree on the common ground in the definition and conceptualization of export performance. However, the majority of scientists used the definition of Cavusgil and Zou (1994) (Azar & Ciabuschi, 2017; Navarro-García, Arenas-Gaitán, Rondán-Cataluña, & Rey-Moreno, 2016). Export performance is defined as the implementation of export and planning strategies, followed by the realization of economic and strategic business objectives after the export of a product in the global market. Export performance is expressed as the financial and non-financial results of the sales made by the enterprises to the target markets (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994). However, Shoham (1998) defines export performance as a mixed result of the financial gains of an enterprise in the international market.

Although export performance is the subject of many researches, a common consensus has not occurred in its measurement. In previous studies on export

performance, different criteria were determined and measurements were made (Azar & Ciabuschi, 2017; Chen, Sousa, & He, 2016). For example, when 124 studies are examined, export performance is measured in 52 different ways (Chen et al., 2016). This situation prevents the comparison of export performance findings and constitutes a major obstacle to the development of literature (Oliveira, Cadogan, & Souchon, 2012). Moreover, the fact that the countries have different economic dimensions in terms of scale and display different performances constitutes the most important factor in not creating a universal measurement criterion. In the literature, many criteria have been proposed for export performance. The majority of recent literature has adopted only criterion of fragmented and uncoordinated export performance. When the literature is examined, it is seen that export performance criteria are divided into three groups as financial, non-financial and mixed criteria. For example, export sales growth, export profits, return on investment (Balabanis & Katsikea, 2003), market share, sales growth, profitability (Byoungcho & Jeong, 2018), expanding operations in export market, and satisfactoriness of the export activities (Monteiro, Soares, & Rua, 2017) are some export performance criteria. Furthermore, Chen, Sousa and He (2016) used the terms of export profitability, export sales growth, export sales and intensity of export as financial criteria. In the same study, satisfaction in export performance and export target success were the most commonly used criteria in non-financial criteria. Therefore, the most commonly used criteria in the literature were used in this study.

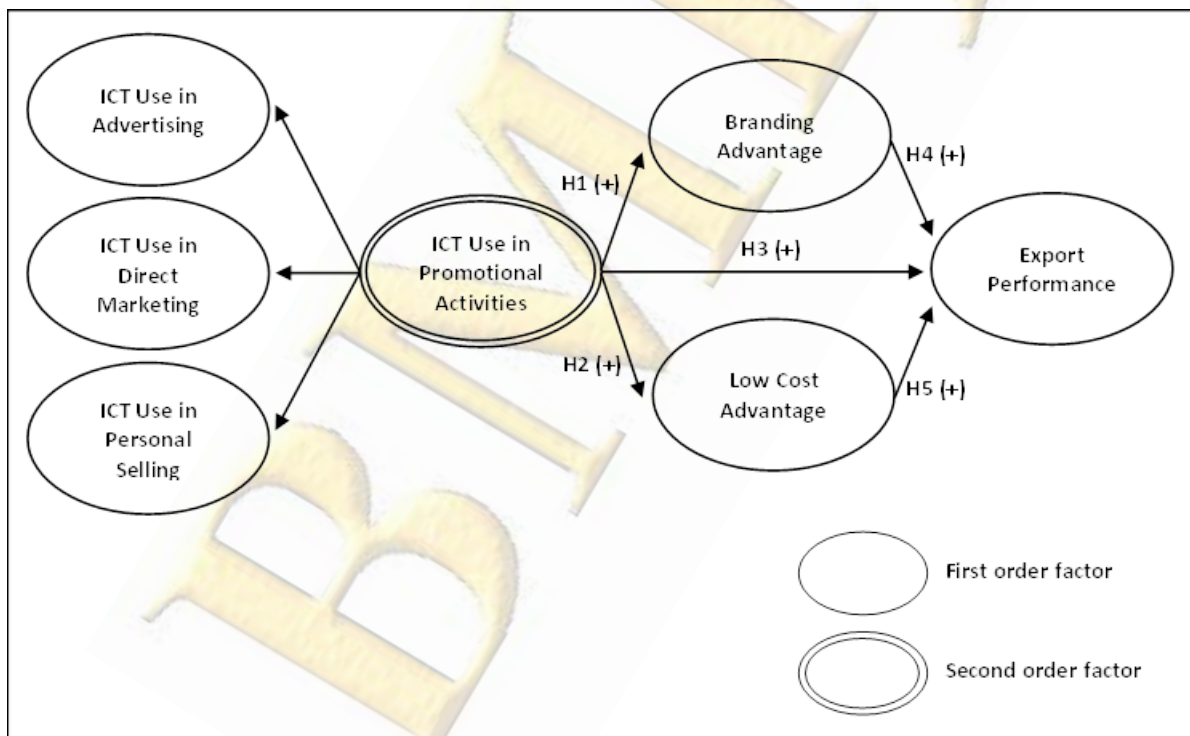
### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

It has been stated in the prior literature that promotional activities using ICT provide brand advantage (Dehghani and Tumer 2015; Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström and Freundt 2014; Tran 2017; Wang and Kim 2017). On the other hand, it has been stated in some studies that promotional activities using ICT provide low-cost advantage (Chung, Fleming and Fleming 2013; Eid and Trueman 2002; Kneller and Timmis 2016; Hamill and Gregory 1997; Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty 2012; Dehghani and Tumer 2015). However in these studies, promotional activities using ICT were not considered as a whole. So this study fills the gap in the literature by examining the effect of ICT-supported three main promotional activity categories (advertising,



direct marketing, personal selling) to branding advantage as well as the low-cost advantage, along with their mediation effect on export performance in a combined conceptual model.

Besides the literature review, a detailed interview was also conducted with the experts in the sector and their opinions were received to gain insight on the use of ICT in promotional activities and their impact in the export markets. Although traditional promotional activities are still used, it is learned that promotional activities especially in advertising, direct marketing, and personal selling benefiting from ICT, are used in the export market and this use has an effect on brand and cost advantage. Therefore, the following conceptual model is proposed, based on the studies in the prior literature as well as the opinions of the experts in the sector:



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model

### 3.1. ICT Use in Promotional Activities, Branding Advantage and Low-Cost Advantage

ICT use is one of the most important source of competitive advantage for firms (Billon, Marco, & Lera-Lopez, 2017). The use of ICT in both public and private sectors is becoming increasingly common today owing to its benefits to firms. Therefore the use of ICT is rapidly increasing in the business world, the public sector

and private life. Despite providing benefits, the emergence of large amounts of data and their evaluation may create difficulties for businesses and other related organizations (Pełech-Pilichowski, Mach-Król and Olszak, 2017). Nevertheless, companies may gain a decisive market advantage through ICT. The use of ICT is important to ensure customer support (assistance with problem solving, ongoing technical support and training programmes). ICT may also be used for effective communication, to compose a positive effect on the knowledge development, as well as on the trust and commitment between the companies and individuals involved (Moen, Madsen, & Aspelund, 2008). ICT is used in almost all businesses and almost all functions such as marketing, production and finance to automate business processes and increase speed and quality (Von Faber & Behnsen, 2012).

Recent developments in information and communication technologies are the main reason for the developing and rising the firm's international performance. Of these technologies, the major important impact on international performance of firms is definitely, the use of the internet (Kneller & Timmis, 2016). It allows marketing departments to communicate with customers interactively (Eid & Trueman, 2002) and provides great opportunities to firms with respect to the goods and services in marketing processes (Grimes 2000; Hamill and Gregory 1997; Hoffman and Novak 1997; Kotler and Keller 2016; Werbach, 2000; Zhou, Gao and Chimhowu, 2019; Quelch and Klein 1996).

In today's globalizing world, in an increasingly competitive environment, worldwide branding has a very important position for today's firms to maintain their assets, to develop and maintain their profitability (Spyropoulou, Skarmeas, & Katsikeas, 2011; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008). At this point, the promotional tools are used to communicate with customers about brand value (Yang and Lee 2016), and one of the vital part of building a branding advantage. Kotler and Keller (2016) state that promotional tools can be seen as an element which is composing communication value between the costumers and firms. The aim of a promotion is to create demand and interest, evaluate information, build brand awareness and loyalty (Yang & Lee, 2016).

Developments in ICT has a great impact on promotion tools and compose new opportunities for business and aid firms to create a brand value. For instance using social media by firms have a positive impact on gaining a branding advantage (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015; Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström, & Freundt, 2014; Tran, 2017; Wang & Kim, 2017). And also using web sites for promotion has a positive effect on gaining a branding advantage (Hamill & Gregory, 1997). All of the communication capabilities, which are the core of the promotional tools, support to the success of export market branding advantage (Spyropoulou et al., 2011). In accordance with the above explanations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between ICT use in promotional activities and branding advantage.*

In international marketing, one of the biggest assistance to the obstacles to overcome is to use ICT in order to develop and maintain long-term customer relationship (Moen et al., 2008). The use of ICT in businesses reduces the cost of trade-supporting services such as finance, insurance, logistics, advertising and customer relationship management (Chung, Fleming, & Fleming, 2013).

Firms use numerous online promotion techniques. For companies to reach their target audience, linking to pages is cheaper than traditional media promotion techniques. Posting to Internet discussion groups, related with the subject of specific markets or products, are another affordable method that marketers use to attract customers to their sites (Eid & Trueman, 2002). In recent years, rapid developments in ICT, especially in web sites have enabled firms to introduce their products to their customers more quickly and easily, particularly in international markets, and the market potential of exporters has increased rapidly. In this way, entering into new markets and the development of an ongoing relationship with the old customers have been made much cheaper and more effective than before (Kneller & Timmis, 2016). Websites, which are a relatively low-cost tool compared to other traditional tools, can be used effectively to reach global customers when designed in a quality manner. There has been a revolution in marketing promotions and marketing with the advance of World Wide Web. Public relations, direct sales, technical support and

advertising activities can be supported through a well-designed website (Hamill & Gregory, 1997). Furthermore, the use of e-mail, which promotional messages are sent by, constitutes an advantage for companies with very low cost compared to promotions such as coupons and discounts (Ellis-Chadwick & Doherty, 2012).

In addition, many service providers or companies, either large or small, choose an online ad on social media (Tran, 2017). The use of social media, for example, using a facebook, in the context of company promotion and informational messages, is an important and cost-effective technique (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015; Tran, 2017). Service providers and companies are continuing their research activities to increase communication through ICT and struggling to contribute to brand awareness with cost-effective manner (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015). Based on the above explanations, this study proposes the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between ICT use in promotional activities and low-cost advantage.*

### **3.2. ICT Use in Promotional Activities and Export Performance**

The most important explanations of the rise in export markets in recent years are the developments in information and communication technologies. The main reason for the rapid development and widespread use of these technologies is the development of the broadband Internet. Broadband technologies are capable of transmitting more comprehensive and faster information. In this way, remote coordination and cooperation can be carried out more quickly and efficiently (Kneller & Timmis, 2016).

Cavusgil and Zou (1994) state that as part of international marketing, competitive intensity stimulates and obliges firms exertion for competitive marketing advantage through price competitiveness, promotion/product adaptation, and better marketing assistance to distributors, all of which are indicators of firms' superior marketing competencies compared to their competitors. This means that competitor orientation should be encouraged such that it factors in all the key factors of competition intensity that are faced in the market (Prasad, Ramamurthy, & Naidu, 2001). Exporters can perform promotion activities, one of the key factors of

competition intensity, with online communication tools with their clients, which may reduce the effect of culture on promotion adaptation. Previous studies generally have shown a positive relationship between general export performance and adaptation of promotional activities of firms (Karavdic & Gregory, 2005). In accordance with the above explanations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis 3: There is a positive relationship between ICT use in promotional activities and export performance.*

### **3.3. Branding Advantage, Low-Cost Advantage and Export Performance**

The relationship between a firm's competitive advantages and its export performance has been examined by many researchers (Morgan, Vorhies, & Schlegelmilch, 2006; Piercy, Nigel, Kaleka, & Katsikeas, 1998; Spyropoulou et al., 2011; Zou, Fang, & Zhao, 2003). Researchers typically report a positive relationship between competitive advantage and export performance. An export venture with a low-cost advantage in international markets has achieved more profitability rates as it has lower costs in its products and services. Additionally, due to low-cost advantage, firms are able to offer their customers better and more value as well as price flexibility. Thus, the company increases its export sales performance and profitability performance (Zou et al., 2003). Company managers compare their companies with their competitors based on performance indicators such as cost of goods sold, unit production cost and sales price in the foreign markets. The competitive advantage of cost includes opinions and evaluations about this comparison. These indicators, generally and traditionally, are considered as determinants of performance in export (Aaby & Slater, 1989).

The competitive advantage associated with product conditions in foreign markets is mainly due to the elements of brand image and product quality (Piercy et al., 1998). Brands are valuable intangible resources that allow export ventures to build and sustain market share, more easily launch new products into the export venture marketplace and leverage marketing expenditures (Morgan et al., 2006). With the acquisition of the brand advantage in the export market, a loyal customer potential with positive opinions and ideas against products and services is gained

(Ling-Yee & Ogunmokun, 2001; Zou et al., 2003). In the export market, the brand advantage directly supports the formation of loyal customer potential (Ling-Yee & Ogunmokun, 2001). Loyal customers are less sensitive to strategies developed by competitors, and generally against prices. This is a great opportunity for export companies, who have obtained loyal customers (Spyropoulou et al., 2011). This loyalty will increase the sales volume and profitability and ensure a large market share (Zou et al., 2003). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

*Hypothesis 4: There is a positive relationship between branding advantage and export performance*

*Hypothesis 5: There is a positive relationship between low-cost advantage and export performance*

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

##### **4.1. Measurement**

Four constructs were measured in this study. These are; ICT use in promotional activities, branding advantage, low cost advantage and export performance. ICT use in promotional activities is measured as a second-order construct which is composed of three dimensions: ICT use in advertising, ICT use in personal selling, ICT use in direct marketing. These constructs were measured by multiple items, using a five-point Likert-type scale with measure indicators ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). Some of the items were taken from ICT and marketing literature's previously-validated scales, and adapted. The rest of the items were sourced from the ICT and marketing literature and newly developed. In accordance with the suggestion of Nunnally (1978), a minimum of three items were used per construct with a view to ensure adequate reliability. In Table 1, the measurement items are shown together with the sources which they were taken and adapted or newly developed.

We intended to gauge the extent of ICT use in promotion activities and positional advantages compared to those of its major rivals in the export market. So low cost advantage, branding advantage and export performance constructs were

measured with multiple items, using a five-point Likert-typescale (1 = "much worse," 5 = "much better") to register the response on each item.

#### **4.2. Pretest and Pilot Test**

The first version of the research tool was previously tested with 3 experts from the private sector, related to the area of the study. Each participant was given a copy of the questionnaire by the researcher. They were asked to provide feedback on the clarity of the instructions, the layout of the questionnaire and the wording of the questions. It is recommended that only a few words be changed to be clearly understood by the experts. It was modified by the researchers. Generally positive feedback was received, no further changes were made in the questionnaire. Pilot test was also performed with 20 questionnaires. After seeing the positive statistical results of pilot test, authors continued on the final data collection and data analysis.

#### **4.3. Sampling and Data Collection**

In order to identify minimum sample size required by the data analysis method of the current study, the table which is given in appendix was used (Hair et al. 2014):

Three parameters required for identifying minimum sample size is selected as follows: (1) significance level ( $p < 0.05$ ), (2) maximum number of arrows pointing at a construct (three), (3) minimum  $R^2$  value (0.50). The table shows that the minimum sample size for the current study should be '38', based on the selected values of the aforementioned parameters.

Export companies in various sectors in Turkey in 2019 have been identified for the research as the target audience. In order to do an effective research, respondents were selected from different sectors and from different regions of Turkey. A questionnaire was applied to the willing participants (export firm's owners / decision-makers) by trained interviewers in June 2019. The questionnaires were mostly applied with a written questionnaire. In addition, methods such as telephone and e-mail were also used. Since the data were collected before January 1st, 2020, the requirement for University's ethics committee approval was waived. Of the 192 export firms owners/decision makers solicited to participate in the study, 188 usable

responses were obtained. This is remarkably above the minimum sample size requirement.

**Table 1. Measurement Items**

Construct	Item no.	Measurement items	Source	Development /adaptation
*Please indicate the frequency of use of the following technologies in your "advertisement" activities in export operations.				
ICT use in Advertising	ADV1	SEO for advertising	(Aslam & Karjaluto, 2017; Bianchi & Mathews, 2016; Leeflang et al., 2014; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014)	Newly developed
	ADV2	Banner for advertising		
	ADV3	Social media for advertising		
ICT use in Personal Selling	PS1	ICT used to communicate with customers	(M. del C. Alarcón-del-Amo, Rialp-Criado, & Rialp-Criado, 2018; Hamill & Gregory, 1997; Lu & Julian, 2007; Moen et al., 2008)	Adapted and Newly developed
	PS2	The ICT creates ongoing relationships with customers.		
	PS3	ICT used in development projects with customers		
*Please indicate the frequency of use of the following technologies in your effort to reach sales by reaching new customers without using the vehicle in export.				
ICT use in Direct Marketing	DM1	E-mail for direct marketing	(Bianchi and Mathews 2016; Gregory, Ngoand Karavdic 2017; Kotler and Keller 2016; Leeflang et al. 2014; Mehta and Sivadas 1995; Radivojević and Stanišić 2015; Sinkovics, Sinkovics and Jean 2013)	Newly developed
	DM2	Web site for direct marketing		
	DM3	WhatsApp, Skype etc. applications for direct marketing		
	DM4	E-commerce sites for direct marketing		
*Rate the following expressions about the brand against your best competitor on the market, close to your own scale.				
Branding Advantage	BA1	Brand awareness	(Spyropoulou et al., 2011; Zou et al., 2003)	Adapted
	BA2	"Share of mind"		
	BA3	Brand personality		
*Evaluate the following statements about your export costs according to your best competitor close to your own scale in the market.				
Low Cost Advantage	LCA1	Actual selling price.	(Zou et al., 2003)	Adapted and Newly developed
	LCA2	Marketing cost terms.		
	LCA3	Total cost terms.		
*Evaluate the export performance criteria below for your best competitor on the market, close to your own scale.				
Export Performance	EP1	Export sales volume	(Morgan-Thomas & Bridgewater, 2004; Sinkovics et al., 2013)	Adapted
	EP2	Contribution of exporting to profits		
	EP3	Overall export performance		



## 5. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Partial least squares (PLS) methodology with Smart PLS 3.0 was used in this study to test the proposed model and related hypotheses. It is preferred because PLS has many advantages. PLS is a more effective and robust method for models with exploratory and predictive purpose (Faizan, Mostafa, Marko, M., & Kisang, 2018; Hair Jr, Matthews, Matthews, & Sarstedt, 2017). Moreover, it shows strong results in testing complex theoretical models with small sample sizes and non-normal data (Faizan et al., 2018). The following sections present the results of the statistical analysis.

### 5.1. Descriptive Statistics

**Table 2.** Sample Characteristics

Sample characteristics		Frequency	Percent (%)
Sector of enterprises' operation	Food	46	24,5
	Machinery	19	10,1
	Electronic	26	13,8
	Textile	51	27,1
	Medical	6	3,2
	Others	40	21,3
	Number of full-time employees	1-10	9
	11-50	54	28,7
	51-200	79	42,0
	201-500	26	13,8
	500+	20	10,6
Gender	Male	152	80,9
	Female	36	19,1
Level of education	Below high school	0	0,0
	High school	17	9,0
	Associate degree	25	13,3
	University diploma/degree	88	46,8
	Postgraduate degree	58	30,9
	Doctorate	0	0,0
Position of respondent in the enterprise	Owner	40	21,3
	Director	24	12,8
	Manager	124	66,0
Years of firm's existence	1-5	21	11,2
	6-10	45	23,9
	11-15	28	14,9
	16-20	29	15,4
	20+	65	34,6
Years of total export activity	1-5	49	26,1
	6-10	47	25,0
	11-15	41	21,8
	16-20	21	11,2
	20+	30	16,0

The descriptive statistics of the sample are presented in Table 2. As can be seen in the descriptive statistics table, as mentioned above, firms from different sectors

were included in the study. It was paid attention that the interviewed officials have information about the subject and a questionnaire was conducted with the persons in the position of manager or company owner. The fact that most of the participants have more than 10 years of export experience is also a remarkable element.

## **5.2. Measurement Model Analysis**

With the help of confirmatory factor analysis, the convergent validity of each structure was tested. Test results related to the convergent validity of constructs are given in Table 3. Examining the standardised factor loadings of each item in the measurement model, the reliability, and the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct were examined to evaluate convergent validity.

A factor loading greater than 0.5 is considered a valid condition for item reliability (Hair et al., 2010). In this respect, the standardised factor loadings of each item were observed and the reliability of the individual items was confirmed.

Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs are above the stipulated level of reliability (0.70), and the AVE for each construct higher than 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As a result, the model satisfies the requirements for convergent validity.

**Table 3.** Validity of Constructs

Construct	Items	Factor loading	Std. Error	t value	AVE (>0.5)	Cronbach's alpha (>0.7)
ICT use in Advertising	ADV1	0.830	0.916	31.314	0.640	0.719
	ADV2	0.738	1.240	14.443		
	ADV3	0.829	1.050	26.025		
ICT use in Direct Marketing	DM1	0.763	1.054	14.466	0.529	0.701
	DM2	0.677	0.940	10.362		
	DM3	0.657	1.130	10.980		
	DM4	0.802	1.294	27.760		
ICT use in Personal Selling	PS1	0.922	0.775	46.938	0.847	0.909
	PS2	0.949	0.781	78.542		
	PS3	0.889	0.843	38.994		
Branding Advantage	BA1	0.850	0.713	29.240	0.665	0.746
	BA2	0.873	0.596	27.523		
	BA3	0.714	0.680	9.074		
Low-cost Advantage	LCA1	0.781	0.785	17.868	0.741	0.822
	LCA2	0.889	0.818	35.701		
	LCA3	0.905	0.794	49.160		
Export Performance	EP1	0.872	0.771	30.698	0.746	0.829
	EP2	0.899	0.784	48.365		
	EP3	0.819	0.714	23.567		

**Table 4.** Construct Cross-loadings

	ICT Use in Advertising	ICT Use in Direct Marketing	ICT Use in Personal Selling	Branding Advantage	Low-Cost Advantage	Export Performance
ADV1	<b>0.830</b>	0.352	0.394	0.209	0.179	0.162
ADV2	<b>0.738</b>	0.245	0.263	0.209	0.130	0.100
ADV3	<b>0.829</b>	0.301	0.435	0.078	0.080	0.100
DM1	0.206	<b>0.763</b>	0.127	0.030	0.279	0.199
DM2	0.227	<b>0.677</b>	0.338	0.186	0.235	0.342
DM3	0.247	<b>0.657</b>	0.382	0.254	0.296	0.210
DM4	0.388	<b>0.802</b>	0.325	0.194	0.325	0.315
PS1	0.405	0.364	<b>0.922</b>	0.313	0.284	0.378
PS2	0.468	0.396	<b>0.949</b>	0.286	0.222	0.335
PS3	0.403	0.385	<b>0.889</b>	0.285	0.270	0.278
BA1	0.261	0.231	0.335	<b>0.850</b>	0.395	0.486
BA2	0.083	0.187	0.182	<b>0.873</b>	0.408	0.519
BA3	0.136	0.159	0.265	<b>0.714</b>	0.270	0.355
LCA1	0.107	0.362	0.224	0.411	<b>0.781</b>	0.588
LCA2	0.149	0.336	0.276	0.334	<b>0.889</b>	0.551
LCA3	0.158	0.319	0.224	0.400	<b>0.905</b>	0.636
EP1	0.054	0.287	0.218	0.467	0.649	<b>0.872</b>
EP2	0.129	0.354	0.289	0.474	0.632	<b>0.899</b>
EP3	0.211	0.324	0.425	0.517	0.505	<b>0.819</b>

Discriminant validity was also evaluated with the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT) that has high power in detecting validity issues in variance-based SEM. HTMT values, showed in Table 6, are below the suggested 0.9 threshold (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

**Table 5.** Square Root of AVE (Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity criteria)

	Branding Advantage	Export Performance	ICT Use in Advertising	ICT Use in Direct Marketing	ICT Use in Personal Selling	Low-cost Advantage
Branding Advantage	<b>0.815</b>					
Export Performance	0.563	<b>0.864</b>				
ICT Use in Advertising	0.201	0.152	<b>0.800</b>			
ICT Use in Direct Marketing	0.239	0.373	0.378	<b>0.727</b>		
ICT Use in Personal Selling	0.320	0.359	0.463	0.415	<b>0.920</b>	
Low-cost Advantage	0.445	0.690	0.161	0.394	0.280	<b>0.861</b>

**Table 6.** HTMT Discriminant Validity Criteria

	Branding Advantage	Export Performance	ICT Use in Advertising	ICT Use in Direct Marketing	ICT Use in Personal Selling	Low-cost Advantage
Branding Advantage						
Export Performance	0.708					
ICT Use in Advertising	0.275	0.195				
ICT Use in Direct Marketing	0.317	0.481	0.512			
ICT Use in Personal Selling	0.389	0.414	0.562	0.505		
Low-cost Advantage	0.560	0.834	0.214	0.516	0.327	

Discriminant validity was examined by comparing the square root of the AVE for each construct. If the square root of its AVE is higher than each correlation values with other constructs, discriminant validity is achieved (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results showed in Table 5 indicates good discriminant validity

### 5.3. Hypothesis Testing

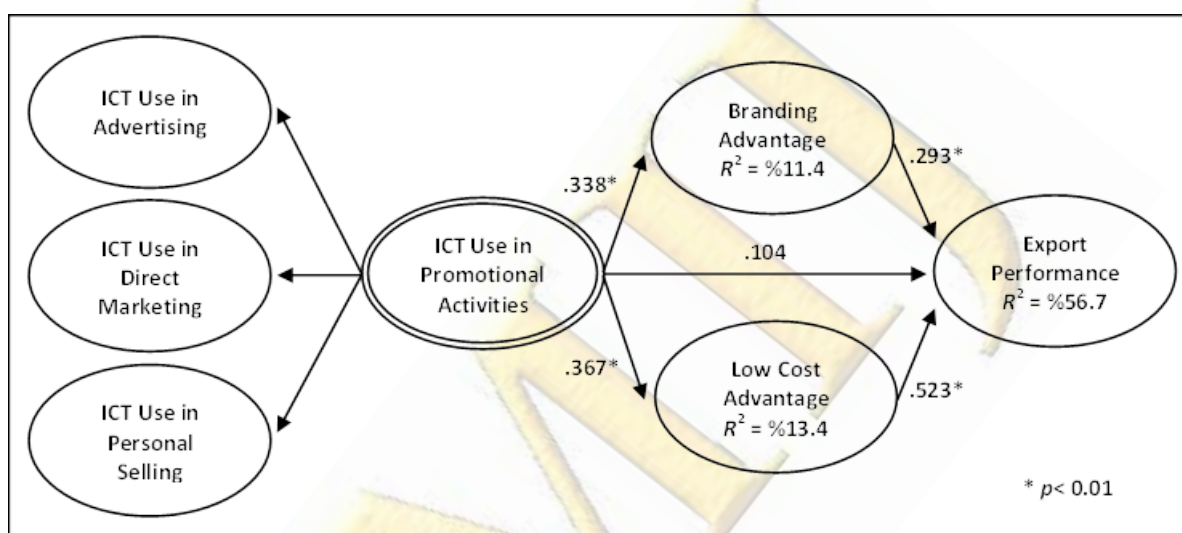
As summarized in Figure 2 and Table 7, four of the five hypothesised paths were significant, while one was not significant.

**Table 7.** Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

	Hypothesis		Original Sample	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	s.d.	Supported
H1	ICT use in Promotional Activities -->	Branding Advantage	0.338	3.965	0.000	0.085	Yes
H2	ICT use in Promotional Activities -->	Low-Cost Advantage	0.367	4.591	0.000	0.080	Yes
H3	ICT use in Promotional Activities -->	Export Performance	0.104	1.453	0.147	0.072	No
H4	Branding Advantage -->	Export Performance	0.293	5.968	0.000	0.049	Yes
H5	Low-cost Advantage -->	Export Performance	0.523	8.523	0.000	0.061	Yes

ICT use in promotional activities was significantly and positively ( $\beta = 0.338$ ,  $t=3.965$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) related with branding advantage. Thus Hypothesis 1 is supported. The results further show that ICT use in promotional activities was significantly and positively ( $\beta = 0.367$ ,  $t=4.591$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) associated with low-cost advantage,

providing support for Hypothesis 2. The results also found that branding advantage was significantly and positively ( $\beta = 0.293$ ,  $t=5.968$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) related to export performance. Hypothesis 4 is thus supported. Similarly, low-cost advantage ( $\beta = 0.523$ ,  $t=8.523$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) was positively associated with export performance. Thus, support was obtained for Hypothesis 5. Branding advantage and low-cost advantage together explained 56,7% of the variance in export performance, and low-cost advantage support being the stronger predictors of export performance.



**Figure 2.** PLS Results of the Structural Model

#### 5.4. Testing the Mediation Effects

According to Hair et al. (2014), the first step for testing the mediation effect is initially assessing the significance of the direct effect without including the mediator variable in the PLS path model. If the direct effect is significant, then the mediator variable in the PLS path model is included and significance of the indirect effect is assessed. Finally, if the indirect effect is significant, the variance accounted for (VAF) is assessed to see the mediation effect. VAF varies between 0 and 100%, with values above 80% indicating full mediation, between 20 and 80% partial mediation, and below 20% no mediation effect (Hair, Hult, G.T.M., Ringle, C.M. and Sarstedt, 2014). From the point of view, we tested and determined that branding advantage mediates the relationship between ICT use in promotional activities and export performance, because the VAF value is (28,42%) ( $t = 4.004$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Low-cost advantage also mediates the relationship between the ICT use in promotional activities and export performance (VAF value: 36,06%;  $t = 4.101$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore, branding advantage

and low-cost advantage are in partial mediation level between ICT use in promotional activities and export performance.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The development and conversion of ICT also plays an important role in the development of international marketing. Integrating ICT into marketing, in particular, will significantly contribute to the effectiveness, productivity and cost of marketing. Moreover, ICT has undertaken a major responsibility in the process of transferring from traditional marketing to digital marketing. The integration of ICT into promotion activities in international markets where competition is intense can offer great advantages to the enterprise on the basis of brand and cost. ICT's tools such as social media, SEO, e-mail and mobile applications, in particular, take promotion activities to a different point. In this study, it has been empirically examined whether the use of ICT in promotional activities has a positive effect on brand advantage and cost advantage. In past studies (Manzoor, 2016; Smith & Vardiabasis, 2010), the impact of promotional activities on brand and low cost advantage was not considered as a whole, for example only the impact of marketing communication tools such as social media generated by ICT on the competitive advantages was examined.

In this study, it was found that promotional activities using ICT have a strong and positive effect on brand advantage and low cost advantage. However, promotion activities using ICT had no direct effect on export performance. In this study, it was also examined whether brand advantage and low cost advantage has a positive effect on export performance. Results of the analyzes show that brand advantage and low cost advantage directly affect export performance. Therefore, these findings show that the competitive advantage has an important role in the export performance of the enterprise. These results are similar to the findings of Zou et al.(2003).

The results of this study provide important conclusions and recommendations to theory, management and practitioners in the field of international trade and marketing. The importance of ICT in world trade with high globalization speed

grows in importance every passing day. This importance is similar on the basis of marketing communication. However, there are few studies based on this subject in the literature. In addition, the promotion model consisting of ICT-based advertising, direct marketing and personal selling sub-dimensions were designed. Therefore, this ICT-based empirical study of marketing communication is thought to make important theoretical contributions to the literature. Secondly, in this study, it was found that the use of ICT in promotional activities had an impact on competitive advantage. It was seen that although this effect was conceptually supported, it was not strengthened by empirical studies. The results of this study also empirically strengthened this thesis. Thirdly, in this study, the competitive advantage is discussed with the sub-dimensions of brand advantage and depression cost advantage. The positive effect of brand advantage and low cost advantage on export performance was similar to other studies in the literature. This has strengthened the existing literature. The fact that the use of ICT in promotional activities did not have a direct effect on export performance supported the necessity of further studies in the literature and thus contributed to the literature from another perspective.

In addition to the contribution of this study to the literature, its managerial outcomes are also very important. Firstly, the effect of the use of ICT in promotion activities on brand advantage creates great opportunities for enterprises. This is observed more clearly especially when the sub-dimensions of promotion activities are examined. In other words, it has been found that the use of ICT tools such as SEO, banners and social media in the marketing communication activities of the enterprises increases the brand awareness of the enterprise. Consequently, increasing the number of such activities will make significant contributions to the brand. The use of ICT tools such as Whatsapp, e-mail and website in direct marketing and personal selling will increase the efficiency of promotion activities and gain favor to brand awareness. The fact that traditional marketing communication tools are costlier is a disadvantage for small-sized enterprises. However, the development of ICT-based marketing communication tools has created a great opportunity, especially for small size enterprises. The results obtained from this study showed that ICT-based promotion activities provide a low cost advantage. Therefore, if



marketing managers are more entrepreneurial in the fields like SEO, Google AdWords, social media, mobile apps, e-mail marketing, and e-commerce sites, this will allow the development of low-cost opportunities. Another important result of this study is the result that the brand advantage has a strong direct impact on export performance. The positive perception level of the brand awareness and personality of the enterprises to the customers can contribute to the sales volume and profitability of exports. Therefore, these findings indicate that enterprises can increase their brand awareness among customers and strategies to correctly position the brand personality may be reflected in the export figures. Another important issue for enterprise managers is that the low cost advantage has an impact on export sales and profitability. The ability of enterprises for minimizing product sales prices as much as possible, reducing their marketing costs in exports and their moves to reduce the total cost will strengthen their competitiveness. Therefore, the low cost advantage will increase the export performance of enterprises by giving them a competitive advantage. As a result, integrating ICT technologies into promotion activities is vital. Because, one of the most important parameters that will trigger the variables in competitive advantage is promotion activities.

A model was created by including three main categories from the promotion activity mix. Further studies can be carried out in the future by including other two categories of the promotion mix. In this study, the biggest constraint in collecting more data and conducting more comprehensive studies was time and cost. In our study, the brand and cost advantage dimensions were examined on the competitive advantage scale. Examining other dimensions in future studies will broaden the scope of the research. In data collection, our population was selected as Turkey. For next studies, it may be beneficial to support this study by obtaining data from other countries. Moreover, similar studies can be applied in different sectors.

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