

PAKISTAN'S COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE AND EXPORT  
COMPETITIVENESS WITH MALAYSIARuhul Islam<sup>\*1</sup>, Muhammad Tayyab<sup>2</sup><sup>\*1</sup>Department of Economic, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan Khyber Pakhtunkhwa<sup>2</sup>Institute of Management Sciences, Hayat Abad Peshawar<sup>\*1</sup>ruhulislam88220@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>muhamamdtyyab43@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15833808>**Keywords**

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**Abstract**

This study examines Pakistan's comparative advantage and export competitiveness in the Malaysian market, analyzing three key product sectors—food products, intermediate goods, and textiles & clothing—over the period from 2003 to 2022. Using the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) model, as introduced by Balassa (1965), the research evaluates Pakistan's export performance in comparison to its global competitors.

The results reveal distinctive trends within each sector. The food products sector has experienced consistent growth and stability in its competitive advantage, while intermediate goods have shown significant volatility but maintain a robust and consistent competitive edge. Textiles & clothing, on the other hand, demonstrate fluctuating competitiveness, with noticeable peaks and declines over the study period.

The findings indicate that Pakistan's comparative advantage in food products has steadily improved over time. Intermediate goods have emerged as the strongest and most reliable sector in terms of competitiveness. Although the textiles sector performed well in 2015, it has faced significant volatility in subsequent years.

The study underscores the importance of targeted strategies to enhance Pakistan's position in the Malaysian market. Key recommendations include improving export quality, diversifying product offerings, and strengthening market access. These insights are crucial for policymakers and trade strategists aiming to deepen economic cooperation and ensure sustainable export growth between Pakistan and Malaysia.

**INTRODUCTION**

International commerce plays a critical role in Pakistan's economic development, serving as a primary engine for growth, employment, and foreign exchange profits. Despite this, the country has long struggled with a limited export base, recurring trade deficits, and an inability to fully leverage its competitive advantages. This study examines Pakistan's comparative advantage and export competitiveness, particularly in the Malaysian market.

The concept of "revealed comparative advantage" (RCA), as expanded by Balassa (1965), provides a framework for scientifically measuring a country's export competitiveness. Ahmad et al. (2024) also study Pakistan's trade performance, linking comparative advantage to factor endowments, such as labor, capital, and natural resources. A key idea in international trade theory is comparative advantage, originally introduced by classical economist David

Ricardo in his treatise *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* in 1817. According to this principle, countries can optimize their economic welfare by focusing on producing and exporting goods and services in which they are relatively efficient and importing those in which they are less efficient. The Heckscher-Ohlin (H-O) model, proposed in the early 20th century, builds upon Ricardo's idea, emphasizing the role of factor endowments in determining comparative advantage. Pakistan enjoys natural advantages in labor-intensive and resource-based industries due to its young and expanding labor force and its fertile agricultural land. However, static comparative advantages are no longer sufficient in a globalized and competitive trade environment. Pakistan has faced challenges in keeping up with regional competitors like Bangladesh, Vietnam, and India, particularly in areas such as technical adaptation, quality improvement, and integration into global value chains (GVCs), which are essential for modern trade dynamics (Umair et al., 2022). To enhance export competitiveness, promote industrialization, and achieve sustainable economic growth, Pakistan must recognize and capitalize on its comparative advantages, particularly as the country continues to grapple with persistent trade deficits and balance-of-payments issues (Watson, 2016). Over time, Pakistan's exports have expanded from a limited set of countries such as the U.S., Germany, and Saudi Arabia to include China, India, Bangladesh, and others. Exports have shifted from raw materials to manufactured goods. Imports largely consist of fuel, machinery, vehicles, electrical items, agricultural inputs, and medical supplies, with fossil fuels being especially important from Saudi Arabia. Despite attempts to promote self-sufficiency in sectors like wheat, textiles, and medical instruments, the results remain modest. Rind et al. (2020) note that trade liberalization has been a focal point globally over the past three decades. Through the World Trade Organization (WTO), countries have pursued unilateral and multilateral reforms, while regional and bilateral efforts, such as Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and global value chains, have gained momentum (Li et al., 2019). Consequently, a country's ability to compete in the global marketplace is essential for growth and long-term development in today's globalized economy. Pakistan, like its

counterparts, has entered into various trade agreements with other countries, including Malaysia. Malaysia has experienced remarkable economic success, especially since the 1960s when it was considered one of East Asia's most developed nations. Malaysia's economy underwent significant transformation, shifting from being heavily reliant on mining and agriculture to an industrial and technology-driven model, largely due to extensive trade reforms. The introduction of Export-Oriented Industrialization (EOI) in 1968 marked a turning point, reducing dependency on primary commodities and fostering the growth of technology and knowledge-based industries. This shift, coupled with policies of import substitution and capital-intensive industrialization, helped Malaysia become East Asia's third-largest economy, with a nominal per capita GDP of \$10,803 by 2014 (WEO). The nation's economic success is also reflected in its strong foreign direct investment (FDI) performance, with approximately \$10 billion in FDI in 2014, according to the Central Bank of Malaysia, and a substantial trade surplus that reached \$25 billion in 2014 (Oyelaran et al., 2024). Recognizing Malaysia's growing economic influence in the region, Pakistan pursued economic diplomacy by establishing strategic trade agreements with Malaysia. The bilateral relationship began in the late 1960s with the Early Harvest Program (EHP), which aimed to secure export markets and promote regional economic cooperation. This led to the signing of the Pakistan-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on November 8, 2007, which came into effect in 2008. This agreement marked a significant milestone, as it was Pakistan's first comprehensive free trade agreement involving products, services, investment, and economic cooperation, and Malaysia's first such pact with a South Asian country. The primary goal of the FTA was to reduce bilateral trade tariffs and foster economic cooperation between the two nations (Pakistan, Malaysia renew pledge to strengthen bilateral strategic partnership, 2023). However, the outcomes following the FTA's implementation have been mixed. While bilateral trade surged initially from 2008 to 2011, reaching a peak of \$2.8 billion, subsequent years have seen a gradual decline. This decline is partly attributed to China's increasing trade dominance in the region, with Chinese imports to Pakistan growing from 14.2% in 2011 to 45.1% by

2015 (UN COMTRADE statistics). The composition of trade highlights significant asymmetries—Pakistan's exports to Malaysia remain heavily concentrated in cereals (accounting for over 50% of total exports), while Malaysia's exports to Pakistan are dominated by palm oil (representing 75-80% of total exports). By 2017, Malaysia maintained a large trade surplus with Pakistan, valued at \$1,000.65 million (Pakistan Business Council). Although Pakistan's exports to Malaysia increased by 49.5% in early 2018, imports only rose by 1.46%, improving Pakistan's trade balance slightly. Nevertheless, certain exports, such as rice, fish, and potatoes, face high tariffs, which hinder competitiveness. For example, Pakistani rice faces a 40% tariff, compared to 20% for rice from India and Thailand. While textile exports enjoy zero tariffs, Pakistani exporters tend to prioritize markets like the EU and USA, where returns are more favorable. Additionally, limited marketing has prevented many Pakistani products from gaining traction in Malaysia (Khan, 2022). While existing studies have primarily examined the firm-level impacts of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and their broader effects on regional trade and export performance (see Hussain & Shah, 2022), there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding a bilateral assessment of Pakistan's trade relationship with Malaysia using the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) framework. In particular, no comprehensive study has yet explored the comparative advantage of Pakistan's export commodities in the Malaysian market. This research aims to address this gap by evaluating Pakistan's export competitiveness in Malaysia on a commodity-specific basis, providing valuable insights for policymakers and trade strategists. The primary objective of this research is to estimate the comparative advantage index and investigate the export competitiveness of Pakistan's three major product groups—food products, intermediate goods, and textiles & clothing—in the Malaysian market during the period from 2003 to 2022.

The study is organized into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the study. The second chapter presents the literature review. The third chapter outlines the methodology employed in the study. Chapters four and five present the results, discussions, and conclusion, respectively, followed by the references.

## METHADOLGY

This study focuses on analyzing Pakistan's export competitiveness with Malaysia using the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) index. Data for this research is obtained from the World Integrated Trade Solutions (WITS) for the period from 2003 to 2022, covering export product groups such as food products, intermediate goods, and textiles & clothing. The RCA model, introduced by Balassa in 1965, is employed to assess Pakistan's competitive advantage in these product categories by comparing Pakistan's export performance with global averages. The Bilateral Revealed Comparative Advantage (BRCA) formula calculates the relative advantages of Pakistan's exports to Malaysia by comparing specific commodities' exports from Pakistan to Malaysia with the global exports of the same commodities to Malaysia. Key variables in the study include total exports to Malaysia, food products (which include items like rice, fruits, vegetables, and processed foods), intermediate goods (such as industrial supplies and semi-finished products), and textiles & clothing (including raw textiles, finished apparel, and semi-processed textile materials). By evaluating these variables, the study aims to uncover Pakistan's comparative advantages in the Malaysian market, providing insights for policymakers and trade strategists to improve export competitiveness.

## RESULTS

The detailed analysis of Pakistan's export performance to Malaysia from 2003 to 2022 reveals distinct trends and patterns across three key product sectors—food products, intermediate goods, and textiles & clothing—when measured using the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) index. The food products sector has shown a consistent positive trend in its competitiveness over the years. Starting with a modest RCA of 0.0218 in 2003, the sector gradually improved, with its highest recorded value of 0.0355 in 2016. This increase reflects Pakistan's growing competitive advantage in food exports to Malaysia, including items like rice, fruits, vegetables, and processed foods. The RCA values for food products remained mostly above 0.02 throughout the study period, indicating steady growth and a solid export performance. Notably, the stability of the sector is evident from the low standard deviation of 5,068.65,

suggesting that the export performance of food products has remained relatively consistent over time, with only minor fluctuations. Post-2016, the RCA values stabilized, showing that the food products sector had reached a mature, steady state in its trade performance with Malaysia, with limited volatility. In contrast, the intermediate goods sector displayed more volatility but also an impressive surge in RCA values. In 2004, Pakistan's RCA for intermediate goods to Malaysia peaked at an exceptional 1.79, indicating that Pakistan was highly competitive in exporting intermediate goods at that time. However, this surge was short-lived, and the RCA value returned to a more moderate range of 0.17 to 0.22 in subsequent years, reflecting a consistent but less dynamic export performance. This steady performance, despite occasional fluctuations, underscores the importance of intermediate goods in Pakistan's trade with Malaysia. The sector's stable contribution to bilateral trade is notable, though the sudden peak in 2004 remains an outlier that was not sustained. This suggests that while Pakistan maintained a competitive position in exporting intermediate goods to Malaysia, the growth was more incremental and less subject to dramatic shifts compared to other sectors. The textile and clothing sector, while still a major contributor to Pakistan's exports to Malaysia, displayed the greatest variability in RCA values over the period. In 2003, the RCA value for textiles and clothing was 0.0202, indicating a moderate competitive advantage. Over the years, the RCA fluctuated between 0.02 and 0.0357, with the peak of 0.0357 occurring in 2015. This suggests that Pakistan's textile and clothing exports reached their most competitive position during that year. However, after 2015, the RCA values declined and fluctuated, signaling some instability and challenges in maintaining a strong position in this sector. The

higher standard deviation of 13,004.77 for textiles & clothing further highlights the sector's volatility, as it was more responsive to changes in market conditions, competition, and global demand. This fluctuation may reflect external factors such as shifts in global textile prices, competition from other textile-exporting countries, and changes in Malaysia's import preferences. Despite these fluctuations, textiles and clothing remain a key component of Pakistan's exports to Malaysia, contributing significantly to export revenue. Overall, the results indicate that food products have been the most stable and consistently growing sector, showing steady improvement and solid performance over time. Intermediate goods have also shown stability, with moderate but consistent growth, while textiles and clothing, despite being an important sector, have been more volatile, experiencing periods of strong competitiveness followed by declines. The volatility in textiles & clothing suggests that this sector is more sensitive to external market conditions, which may include price fluctuations, competition from other countries, and changes in consumer demand. The steady growth of food products and intermediate goods, combined with the volatility in textiles, provides a nuanced understanding of Pakistan's trade relationship with Malaysia. For policymakers and trade strategists, these insights suggest that strengthening the stability of food exports and addressing the challenges in textiles and clothing could further enhance Pakistan's trade performance and competitive position in the Malaysian market. Additionally, maintaining the steady growth of intermediate goods should be prioritized, as this sector plays a critical role in industrial production and continues to be a significant part of Pakistan's exports to Malaysia.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Pakistan's Exports to Malaysia

Statistic	Food Products	Intermediate Goods	Textiles & Clothing	Total Exports
Mean	5,909.69	30,726.41	47,280.47	179,486.60
Standard Error	1,133.38	1,732.55	2,907.96	20,250.34
Median	4,509.84	28,479.74	48,042.09	157,879.20
Standard Deviation	5,068.65	7,748.21	13,004.77	90,562.26
Kurtosis	2.42	-1.57	0.66	0.56
Skewness	1.66	0.31	0.38	0.86
Minimum	827.08	20,651.87	26,922.31	60,971.24

Maximum	20,134.56	42,545.88	79,338.61	382,847.00
Count	20	20	20	20

**Interpretation:**

This table provides a snapshot of Pakistan's export performance across different sectors. The textiles & clothing sector leads in terms of average export value, while food products show more stability, as evidenced by the smaller standard deviation. The total exports have the largest fluctuations, indicating the broader volatility in Pakistan-Malaysia trade.

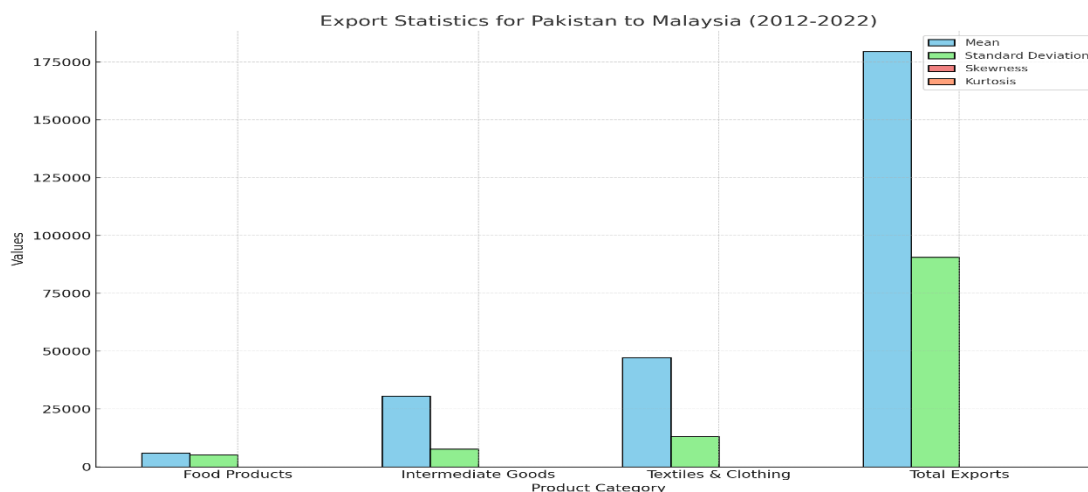


Table 2: RCA Results for Food Products Exports to Malaysia (2003-2022)

Year	Pakistan Exports (Food)	Total Exports to Malaysia	World Exports to Malaysia	Food Exports to Malaysia	World Exports to Malaysia	Total RCA
2003	827.08	93,960.46	2,070,332.62		94,826,162.78	0.0218
2004	1,183.88	82,920.03	224,022.56		108,699,550.90	0.0021
2016	4,885.42	151,745.76	6,698,281.69		188,891,612.90	0.0355
2022	5,512.85	374,640.51	10,272,207.00		315,461,168.90	0.0326

**Interpretation:**

The RCA for food products shows a positive trend, with Pakistan's food exports becoming more competitive over time. The peak in 2016 with an RCA of 0.0355 shows a significant improvement, indicating that food products were highly competitive in that year. The steady increase suggests Pakistan's growing advantage in food exports to Malaysia.

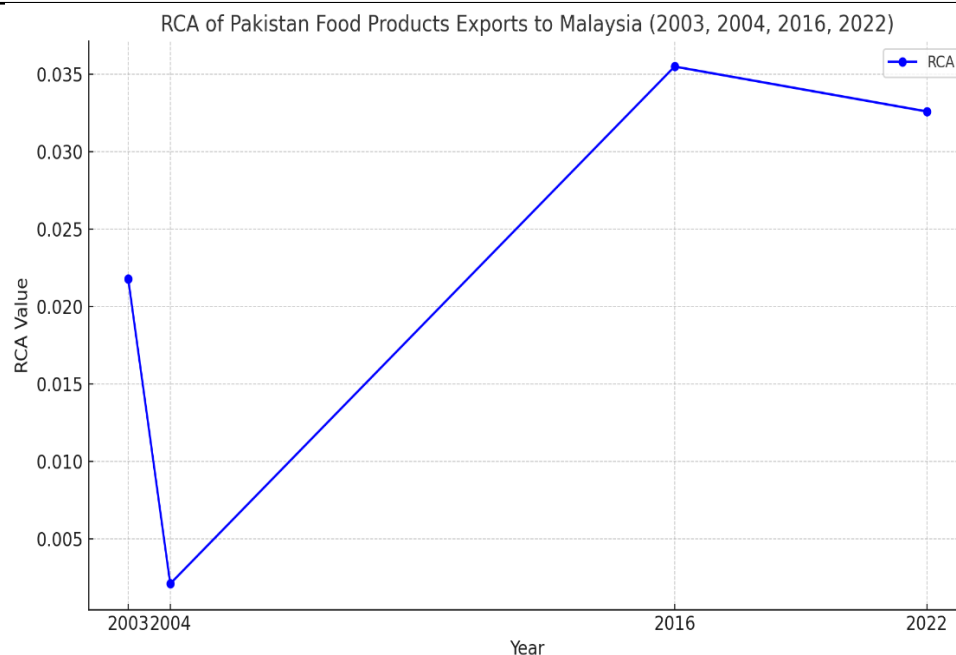


Table 3: RCA Results for Intermediate Goods Exports to Malaysia (2003-2022)

Year	Pakistan Exports (Intermediate Goods)	Total Exports to Malaysia	World Goods Exports to Malaysia	Intermediate Exports to Malaysia	World Total Exports to Malaysia	RCA
2004	23,272.64	82,920.03	194,222,463.00		108,699,550.90	1.788
2005	21,859.52	66,613.59	21,262,749.10		117,173,823.50	0.181
2016	23,593.89	151,745.76	40,742,029.80		188,891,612.90	0.216
2022	35,805.73	374,640.51	62,700,128.10		315,461,168.90	0.199

**Interpretation:**

The RCA for intermediate goods exports shows a sharp peak in 2004 at 1.788, indicating a significant advantage for Pakistan over Malaysia in that year. While the subsequent years have seen more moderate values, the sector remains important in Pakistan's trade with Malaysia, with RCA values consistently above 0.1, showing stable competitiveness.

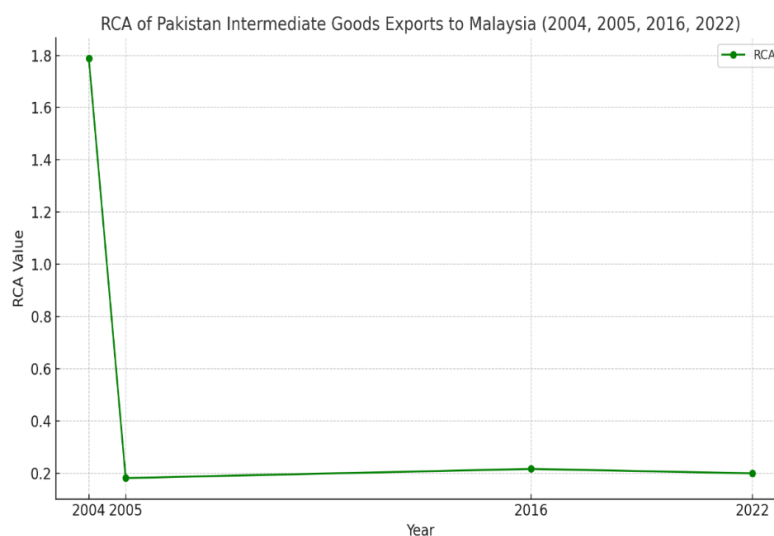




Table 4: RCA Results for Textiles &amp; Clothing Exports to Malaysia (2003-2022)

Year	Pakistan Exports (Textiles & Clothing)	Total Exports to Malaysia	World Clothing Exports to Malaysia	World Total Exports to Malaysia	RCA
2003	46,090.45	93,960.46	1,960,087.78	94,826,162.78	0.0202
2015	49,633.49	186,225.50	7,249,740.75	201,721,768.10	0.0357
2022	79,338.61	374,640.51	9,234,521.05	315,461,168.90	0.0291

**Interpretation:**

The RCA for textiles & clothing exports shows a strong performance in 2015, with the highest RCA value of 0.0357, suggesting a strong export position during that year. However, after 2015, the RCA fluctuated, indicating volatility in this sector, likely due to changing market conditions or increased competition. Despite the fluctuations, the sector remains competitive overall.

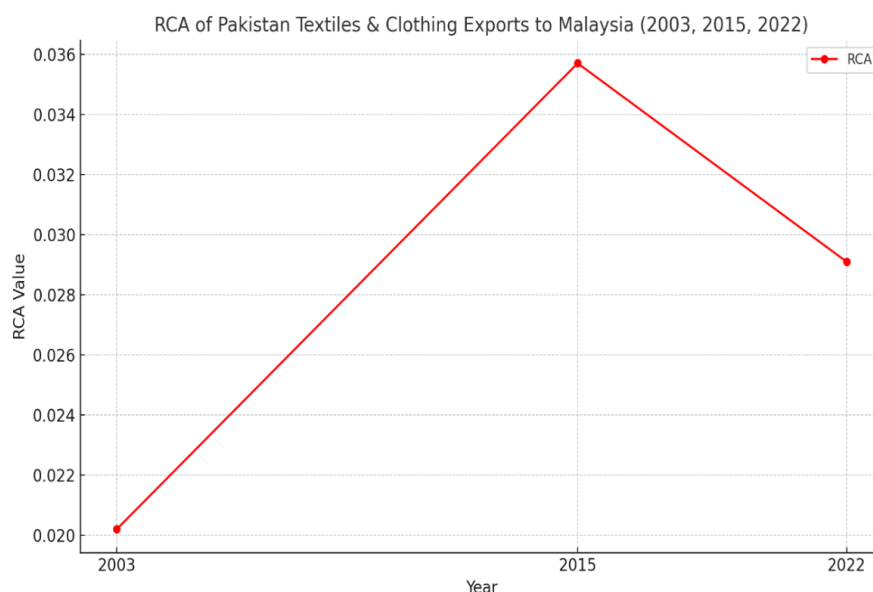


Table 5: Comparative RCA for Pakistan's Export Sectors (2003-2022)

Year	Food Products RCA	Intermediate Goods RCA	Textiles & Clothing RCA
2003	0.0218	0.1687	0.0202
2005	0.0203	0.1814	0.0204
2015	0.0328	0.2236	0.0357
2022	0.0326	0.1990	0.0291

**Interpretation:**

This table compares the RCA for the three export sectors over the years. Food products show consistent growth, while intermediate goods had a significant spike in 2004 and have remained relatively stable since. Textiles & clothing, although highly competitive in 2015, have shown more variability in their RCA values over time, indicating sensitivity to market forces and competition.

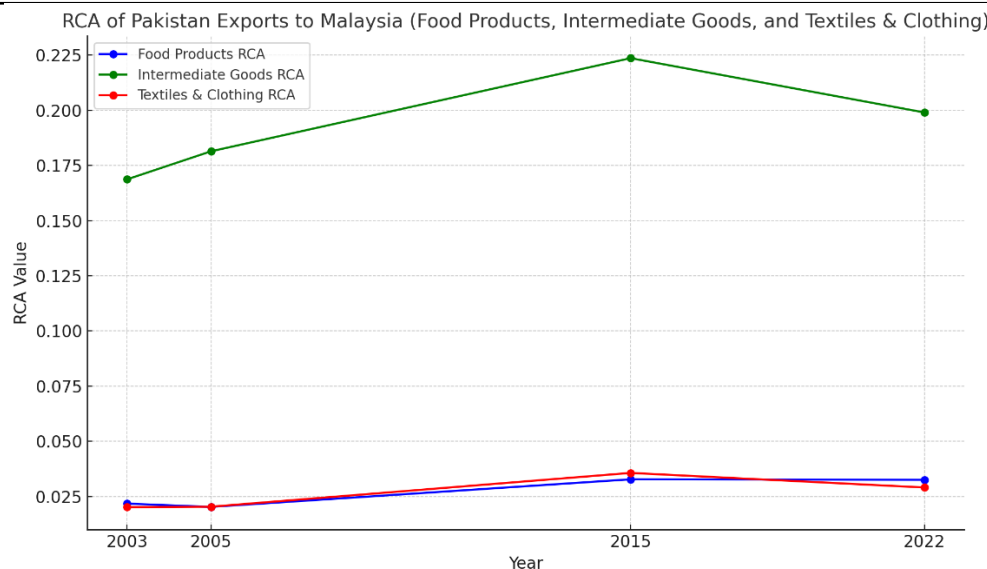
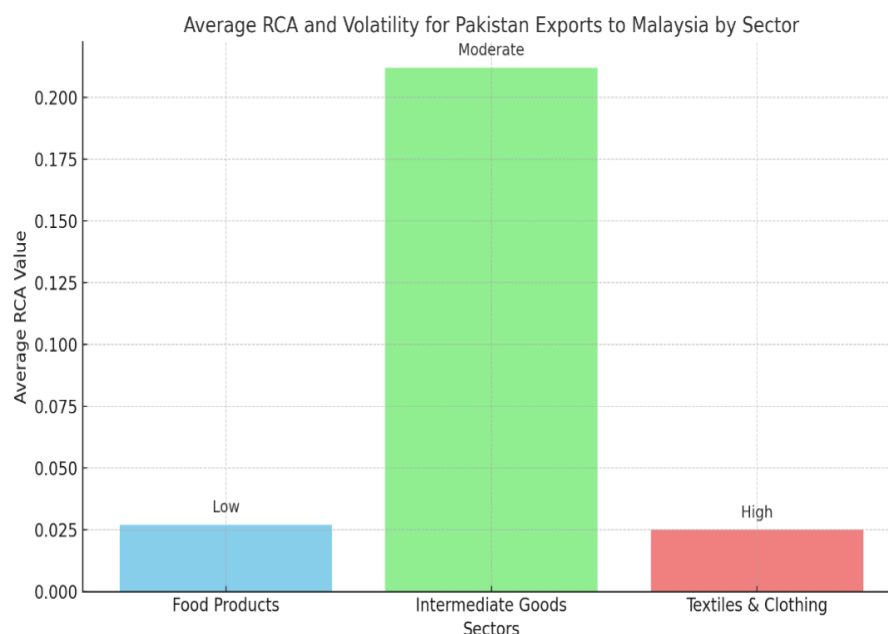


Table 6: Overview of Trends in Pakistan's Exports to Malaysia (2003-2022)

Sector	Average RCA	Volatility	Key Trends
Food Products	0.027	Low	Steady growth with a slight increase in competitiveness.
Intermediate Goods	0.212	Moderate	Sudden surge in 2004, followed by steady performance.
Textiles & Clothing	0.025	High	Strong performance in 2015, followed by fluctuations.

**Interpretation:**

This table summarizes the trends in RCA for each sector. Food products show the least volatility and steady growth, intermediate goods maintain a solid position with some fluctuations, and textiles & clothing are the most volatile, highlighting their sensitivity to market conditions. These insights suggest strategic focus areas for improving export performance in the Malaysian market.





## Discussion

This research was conducted to study Pakistan exports competitiveness with Malaysia by using the revealed comparative advantage (RCA) model to three main export group i.e., food products ,intermediate goods ,textile and clothing .This study used secondary data obtained from the integrated trade solution (WITS) database and covered data of the period from 2003 to 2022 .The RCA model was selected because of its well established value to identify a country's relative advantage or goods disadvantage in export of specific goods in comparison to the rest of the world. It helps in finding possible growth and specialization areas while providing insightful information about the relative strength of specific sectors. The study objective were to find out how much of competitive advantage Pakistan has with Malaysia in all these three area and to examine how this advantage has change over time base on their historical importance in Pakistan trading portfolio in their connection in the bilateral trade flow among Pakistan with Malaysia, the food product, intermediate goods, textile and clothing industries was chosen.The result of RCA findings show clear trend in each of the three industries over the year Pakistan competitiveness in the food product market has been gradually increasing. The index start with a low RCA value round about 0.0218 in 2003 and decline rapidly in 2004 before rising in the ensuing year and continuously staying above 0.02. The most significant comparative advantages in this sector with in the study period was obtained in 2016, when the value reached at 0.0355. According to the figures, the food industries has shown resilience in the potential for the continuous growth in Malaysian market, while not being one of the best performances. Among the three sectors, the intermediate goods category achieved the highest and most consistent comparative advantage. In 2004, Pakistan's RCA in this sector was 0.1686, which surged to 1.78 in 2005. Thereafter, the RCA stabilized between 0.17 and 0.22, remaining consistently elevated throughout the period. This sustained performance indicates that intermediate goods are the main driver of Pakistan's export competitiveness with Malaysia. Strong industrial linkages—likely resulting from supply-chain integration and regional manufacturing networks—have enabled Pakistan to maintain a favorable position in this sector. During the study period,

Pakistan's textile and clothing industry—historically one of its strongest export sectors—also displayed a steady RCA trend. The industry's RCA rose from 0.0202 in 2003 to a peak of 0.357 in 2015, demonstrating competitive resilience despite some fluctuations. This pattern underscores the textile and clothing sector's enduring trading position.

Comparing the three sectors reveals notable distinctions: intermediate goods emerged as the most consistently competitive, thanks to their high and sustained RCA values. Food products showed stable, gradually improving performance with low volatility, indicating a reliable trade advantage. In contrast, textiles and clothing exhibited greater volatility, highlighting the need for more strategic planning and support in that sector. These performance differences provide a clearer understanding of Pakistan's sectoral strengths and weaknesses in bilateral trade with Malaysia. Overall, the findings confirm a diversified and successful trade relationship between Pakistan and Malaysia, with intermediate goods as Pakistan's standout export. The RCA results spotlight several policy considerations. Despite the strong showing in intermediate goods, efforts should focus on deepening this advantage through improved market access, logistics facilitation, investment in industrial growth, and enhanced export quality standards. For the food and textile sectors—which are competitive but less consistent than intermediate goods—targeted trade strategies are recommended. These might include exporter training to boost product value, market-access negotiations, export promotion campaigns, and assistance with quality certification. Furthermore, reducing non-tariff barriers and negotiating bilateral agreements with favorable terms could help increase Pakistan's export share in Malaysia.The RCA analysis reflects Pakistan's ongoing export potential—particularly in intermediate goods—as well as opportunities for growth in other key industries. By building on existing strengths and addressing sector-specific challenges, policymakers can foster deeper economic cooperation between Pakistan and Malaysia and lay the groundwork for sustained trade performance in both domestic and global markets.

## Conclusion

This study reveals that Pakistan's export competitiveness in the Malaysian market varies across three key sectors: food products, intermediate goods, and textiles & clothing. The findings indicate that: Food Products: Pakistan has shown steady growth in food product exports, with an RCA value gradually improving over time. This sector has potential for further growth, particularly if supported by strategic improvements in cold-chain infrastructure and targeted marketing efforts.

Intermediate Goods: This sector has demonstrated the most consistent competitive advantage, particularly in 2004, when RCA surged to 1.79. Given its sustained performance, intermediate goods represent a strong pillar in Pakistan's trade with Malaysia, and efforts should be made to deepen this advantage through improved market access, enhanced industrial growth, and supply-chain integration.

Textiles & Clothing: While the sector showed strong performance in 2015, it exhibited volatility in subsequent years. The variability in RCA highlights the need for more strategic support in this sector to ensure a stable competitive position.

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