The Role of Market and Learning Orientations in Relationship Quality – Evidence from Vietnamese Exporters and Their Foreign Importers

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the role of market and learning orientations in relationship quality between exporters in developing economies and their foreign importers and subsequently export performance. A random sample of 283 export firms in Vietnam provides evidence to support the hypothesized main effects. The multigroup analysis results further indicate that learning orientation plays a role in building high quality relationships for both new and mature relationships. However, the impacts of market orientation on relationship quality and export performance are found only in the new relationship. The results also indicate that the structure of firm ownership does not moderate the relationships between market orientation, learning orientation, relationship quality, and export performance. Implications for business firms and directions for future research are also addressed.

Introduction

It is impossible for firms not to have relationships with other firms as they cannot operate in isolation (e.g., Hakansson 1982). Research has shown that firms' competitive advantage can be created through keeping long-term relationships with customers and that many firms are moving from transactional discrete exchanges to relational ones (Ganesan 1994). This is because loyal customers will bring more profits to firms than the price-sensitive and deal-prone switcher (Reicheld 1996). In addition, committed relationships are among the most durable advantages because they are difficult for competitors to understand, to copy, or to displace (Day 2000; Srivastava et al. 2001). The emergence of this trend indicates that firms realize the importance of relationship quality between them and their customers. Understanding how to initiate, develop, and maintain high quality buyer-seller relationships in international markets is critical to successful export involvement (Styles and Ambler 1994). Consequently, the role of market relationships has emerged as a top priority for most business firms around the world.

Research on inter-firm relationships, particularly research on relationship quality, however, has largely focused on developed economies, e.g., the United States and others (Leonidou and Kaleka 1998). Less has been undertaken in the developing world. The conducting these relationships in the international context adds another level of complexity to business-to-business relationships. Therefore, additional research is needed (e.g., Bigne and Blesa 2003; Frazier 1999; Sanzo et al. 2003; Simpson et al. 2001). Moreover, although market and learning orientations have been widely studied (e.g., Slater and Narver 1995; Sinkula et al. 1997) little attention has been paid to the role of these two organizational factors in the quality of business-to-business relationships. In addition, most previous research examines the competitive value of market and learning orientations under the lens of the operating environment condition. Drawing on the resource-based view of the firm (Wernerfelt 1984), this study investigates the role of market and learning orientations through internal capabilities of the firm. Specifically, it views market and learning orientations as forms of organizational culture and explores their impacts on the quality of business relationships between exporters in developing economies and their foreign importers, and subsequently export performance. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: First, we review the literature and propose the hypotheses. Subsequently, we present the method, data analysis and the results. We conclude the paper by discussing a number of implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Figure 1 depicts a conceptual model that presents the role of market and learning orientations in building high quality business relationships. Learning orientation and market orientation are expected to have direct impacts on relationship quality. Learning orientation is also hypothesized to be an antecedent of market orientation. Finally, export performance is the outcome of relationship quality.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality is an important aspect in maintaining and evaluating buyer-seller relationships. It can be defined as “an overall assessment of the strength of a relationship and the extent to which it meets the needs or expectations of the parties based on a history of successful or unsuccessful events” (Smith 1998: 78). Several conceptualizations of relationship quality have been proposed such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction (e.g., Smith 1998), willingness to invest, conflict, expectation of continuity (e.g., Kumar et al. 1995), and minimal opportunism (e.g., Dwyer and Oh 1987). However, trust, commitment, minimal opportunism, and satisfaction are widely accepted as the dimensions of relationship quality because they have received strong empirical support (e.g., Dorsch et al. 1998; Dwyer and Oh 1987; Nguyen et al. 2004).

Trust can be defined as the willingness of an export firm to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectations that the other party will behave in a “right” (good) way towards the firm (Kumar et al. 1995). This definition of trust reflects two essential dimensions – honesty and benevolence. Honesty is based on the belief that the firm stands by its words (Anderson and Narus 1990), fulfils promised role obligations, and is sincere (Dwyer and Oh 1987). Benevolence is the belief that the firm is interested in its partner’s welfare, and will not take unexpected actions that would have a negative impact on the partner (e.g., Anderson and Narus 1990). Trust plays a central role in inter-firm relationships and is essential for the development of enduring partnerships (Morgan and Hunt 1994) because it facilitates constructive dialogue and cooperative problem solving, enabling the firm not only to work together with other firms more effectively but, to reduce perceived uncertainty and complexity in the future.

Commitment is another dimension of relationship quality. It is central to successful relationship marketing because it enables independent channel members to work together to serve customers better and to achieve a higher level of performance (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Commitment to a relationship entails a desire to develop a stable relationship, and a willingness to sacrifice short-term benefits to maintain stability in a long-term relationship (Anderson and Weitz 1992). Three main types of commitment have been found in the literature, i.e., continuance, behavioral, and affective (e.g., Kim and Frazier 1997). Continuance commitment is reflected in the stability of a relationship and is defined as an exporter's desire to continue the relationship with foreign customers, which brings the exchange partners closer together (Anderson and Weitz 1992). Any firms interested in ongoing exchange relationships with their customers would have a propensity for relation continuity. Behavioral commitment is reflected in the actual behavior of an exporter towards an importer. It is defined as the extent to which an exporter provides special help to its foreign customer in times of need. High behavioral commitment is indicated by the exporter's expressive behavior that shows it cares about the importer. The exporter not only performs its pre-agreed roles but also provides extra helps for its foreign customer as required under various situations. Behavioral commitment is realized in the concrete behavior through which the partners become committed. Gundlach et al. (1995) note that remaining in a relationship and compliance with contractual stipulations indicate behavioral commitment. Affective commitment is the attitudinal aspect of an exporter's business ties to its foreign customer. Affective commitment refers to the sense of unity binding an exporter to its importer (Kim and Frazier 1997). Highly affective commitment means that the exporter feels a strong unity of interests and goals with the importer and can work with the importer in harmony (Anderson and Narus 1990).

The third dimension of relationship quality is satisfaction. It can be defined as the extent of a partner's overall affective evaluation of the relationship (Anderson and Narus 1990). Satisfaction is also a key aspect of successful buyer-seller relationships as it motivates satisfied parties to commit more to beneficial exchange relationships (Leuthesser 1997). Satisfaction is considered to be an indicator of how a firm assesses some of the other costs and benefits of its relationship beyond economic performance and conflict levels (Cullen et al. 1995).

The final dimension of relationship quality is minimal opportunism. Opportunism is defined, in general terms, as "self-interest seeking with guile" (Williamson 1975: 6). Opportunistic behavior refers to the taking of unexpected actions that will generate negative outcomes for a firm that is involved in a transaction or relationship. Successful business relationships provide enhanced efficiencies for both buyers and sellers (Kalwani and Narayandas 1995). In spite of such benefits, it has been revealed that business relationships between buyers and sellers have a high failure rate (Parkhe 1993). Though divergent long-term goals can be used for explaining these failures, a primary reason for the "failure of many alliances is the inability to check opportunism by the alliance partners" (Bucklin and Sengupta 1993: 33). This means that opportunistic behavior decreases the possibility of achievement of common goals. The consequences of opportunistic behavior include the failure of exchange partners to fulfill promises and obligations, and the possible termination of the relationship. In an international context, an exporter works with its foreign importers in far distance in terms of geography and culture, making international channel members easily to engage in opportunistic behavior (Cavusgil et al. 2004). Therefore, the development of satisfying relational exchange also requires minimal opportunism (Dwyer and Oh 1987).

Relationship quality is considered to be the essence of relationship marketing (Jap et al. 1999) and serves as an indicator of the health and future well-being of long-term relationships (Crosby et al. 1990). Accordingly, several researchers have attempted to investigate possible predictors of relationship quality. For example, salesperson's expertise and relational selling behavior have been found to have positive impacts on relationship quality between salespersons and customers in the life insurance industry (Crosby et al. 1990). Dwyer and Oh (1987) found that the quality of channel relationships is affected adversely by the degree of partners' bureaucratization. Procedural fairness has been examined to have a positive impact on relationship quality, while environmental uncertainty has a negative effect on relationship quality (Kumar et al. 1995). Smith (1998) found that relational bonds have a positive effect on relationship quality. Following this stream of research, this paper examines the impact of two key organizational factors–market and learning orientations–on relationship quality.

Market and Learning Orientations

The resource-based view of the firm (Wernerfelt 1984) posits that when a firm owns valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources and is able to implement value-creating strategies that can not be easily duplicated by competitors, the firm can achieve sustainable competitive advantage (e.g., Barney 1991; Eisenhardt and Martin 2000). The valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable attributes of resources form the basis of unique value-creating strategies (Eisenhardt and Martin 2000; Teece et al. 1997). In this study, both market and learning orientations are viewed as forms of organizational culture and are firm-level resources, which are sources of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney 1986; Hult et al. 2004; Menguc and Auh 2006; Slater and Narver 1995).

Market-oriented firms continuously collect information about target customers' needs and competitors' capabilities, and use this information to continuously create superior customer value (Slater and Narver 1995). Narver and Slater (1990: 21) define market orientation as “the organizational culture that most effectively and efficiently creates the necessary behaviors for the creation of a superior value for buyers and, thus, continuous superior performance for the business.” These researchers propose three behavioral dimensions–customer orientation, competitor orientation, and interfunctional coordination. Each of these dimensions plays its role in intelligence generation, dissemination, and responsiveness to the collected information. Learning orientation refers to “organization-wide activity of creating and using knowledge to enhance competitiveness” (Calantone et al. 2002: 516). It comprises three dimensions–commitment to learning, shared vision, and open-mindedness which direct a firm to create and encourage a learning environment throughout the firm (Sinkula et al. 1997). The firm continuously promotes the organizational learning process, that is, information acquisition, information dissemination, and shared interpretation (Sinkula 1994). The firm endlessly creates and uses new knowledge about customers and competitors that has the potential to influence the firm’s performance (Emden et al. 2005; Sinkula et al. 1997). Therefore, both market and learning orientations are related to specific and routine processes that create superior value to customers, and thus, assist a firm to gain sustainable competitive advantage (Baker and Sinkula 1999; Celuch et al. 2002; Hult et al. 2004; Slater and Narver 1995; Yeniyurt et al. 2005).

In export markets, sustainable competitive advantage created by market and learning orientations can be obtained through exporters’ capabilities of building high quality relationships with their foreign importers. Both orientations are related to customer interface behaviors (Celuch et al. 2002) and assist exporters to achieve competencies in foreign market knowledge (Yeniyurt et al. 2005). These capabilities will stimulate exporters to join efforts with their partners in order to achieve mutual and individual goals successfully, which discourage opportunistic behaviors (Stern and Reve 1980). Market- and learning-oriented exporters are willing to understand the needs and wants of their partners, and to satisfy these needs more effectively and efficiently than their competitors. These exporters value the benefits of exporter-importer relationships and will seek to put their partners' needs as a priority in the organizational concerns (Emden et al. 2005; Deshpande et al. 1993; Hult et al. 2000; Kalwani and Narayandas 1995; Slater and Narver 1995; Siguaw et al. 1998). In addition, learning orientation can foster market-oriented behavior in an organization (Jaworski and Kohli 1996). A key component of learning orientation is a firm's ability to engage in adaptive as well as generative learning (Slater and Narver 1995). This enables the firm to acquire, process, and subsequently use market intelligence, i.e., reflects its market orientation (Jaworski and Kohli 1996). Also, the learning-oriented firm is more likely to leverage the use of all resources, including the behaviors that accompany a market orientation (Baker and Sinkula 1999). Thus,

H1: A positive relationship between market orientation and relationship quality is expected.

H2: A positive relationship between learning orientation and relationship quality is expected.

H3: A positive relationship between learning orientation and market orientation is expected.

Relationship Quality and Export Performance

Performance in international marketing channels is defined as "the accomplishments–real and perceived–that have resulted from the manufacturer-distributor relationship" (Rosson and Ford 1982: 61). A number of performance measures have been proposed in the literature. There are two approaches to measure performance, i.e., objective and subjective measures. The first approach is based on financial indicators which include such measures as return on investment, profits, margins, sales, sales growth, and asset turnover. The second approach is employed to measure a firm's absolute and relative performance on tasks, such as market share and new product development. This study focuses largely on the firm's performance in dealing with its specific partner and, therefore, employed the latter approach. Moreover, Geringer and Hebert (1991) found that objective and subjective measures of performance correlate highly.

A high level of relationship quality is likely to have positive consequences for the relationship. The benefits of a high level of relationship quality should translate into the economic performance for both partners. A high quality relationship leads to efficient transactions such as shortened response time, advantages in logistics management, and marketing programs that contribute to the firm's efficiency and effectiveness in serving its market. These, in turn, can create a strong market position which will be reflected in the firm's performance. When conditions required for a high relationship are met, the exporter or its foreign importer (or both) is more likely to be attracted to an existing relationship, and such relationships can be expected to continue in the future. As a result, agreement on such matters as decision making, and mutual dependence should increase, moving the relationship closer to long-term partnership. Research has shown that long-term partnerships lead to increased mutual profitability (Anderson and Weitz 1992) and enhance the performance outcomes in buyer-seller relationships (Noorderwier et al. 1990). Likewise, Kalwani and Narayandas (1995: 14) found that "maintaining close relationships with customers in the long-run lead to high profitability through better understanding and servicing of customer needs". Suppliers who develop better relationships with their foreign customers are likely to enjoy superior performance in terms of ultimate outcomes such as sales and share of customer business (Leuthesser and Kohli 1995). Therefore,

H4: A positive relationship between relationship quality and export performance is expected.

Method

The Sample

A systematic sample of 283 Vietnamese export firms in Ho Chi Minh City, the major business centre of Vietnam, was surveyed. The sampling frame, based on the Business Directories in Ho Chi Minh City, consisted of about 5,000 firms in all industries. The single key informant approach, the most commonly used method in organizational research (Kumar et al. 1993), was used in this study. Respondents were export managers of the firms. Partial self-administered surveys, in which questionnaires are mailed to the target respondents and are collected by interviewers, were used for this study. Follow-up telephone calls to remind respondents to complete the questionnaires prior to collection were utilized.

Three hundred and twenty completed questionnaires were collected from 400 distributed questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 80 percent. Among 320 completed questionnaires, 37 were found invalid because these respondents were not members of management in charge of export activities. Consequently, the remaining 283 valid completed questionnaires comprised the sample for this research. The sample comprised 145 (51.2%) state-owned firms and 138 (48.8%) firms with other types of ownership (join-stock, limited-proprietary, and private-owned firms). In terms of firm age, 173 (61.1%) firms were in business less than 10 years; 93 (30.8%) firms were in business from 11 to 20 years. Only 17 (6.1%) firms were in business more than 30 years. In terms of relationship duration, 166 (58.7%) firms had business relationships with their partners less than five years and 117 (41.3%) firms had business relationships with their business partners more than five years. Using chi-square tests with respect to firm ownership and firm age we found that no significant difference between the population percentages and the sample percentages. This suggests that the sample and population profiles (based on these two key variables) are not significantly different.

Measurements

Learning orientation was measured based on Sinkula et al.'s (1997) scale. It was a second-order construct consisting of three dimensions, i.e., commitment to learning (measured by 4 items), shared vision (4 items), and open-mindedness (3 items). Market orientation was also a second-order construct and was measured using Narver and Slater's (1990) scale. It comprised three dimensions: customer orientation (7 items); competitor orientation (4 items); and, interfunctional coordination (5 items). Relationship quality was a high-order construct comprising two second-order constructs (trust and commitment), and two first-order constructs (satisfaction and minimal opportunism). Trust had two dimensions: honesty and benevolence. Honesty was measured by 12 items and benevolence was measured by 10 items. These measures were developed by Kumar et al. (1995). Commitment was measured by using Kim and Frazier (1997)'s scale. Commitment comprised three dimensions: continuance commitment (6 items); behavioral commitment (10 items); and, affective commitment (7 items). Satisfaction was measured based on the scale (7 items) developed by Gaski and Nevin (1985). Minimal opportunism was measured using Lee's (1998) scale (13 items). Finally, export performance was measured by 10 items based on Raven et al.'s (1994) scale. The questionnaire was initially prepared in English and then translated into Vietnamese by an academic who is fluent in both languages. Back translation was undertaken to ensure the equivalence of meanings.

Data Analysis and Results

Measurement Validation

All measures used were first refined via Cronbach's alpha and then tested by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The Cronbach's alphas of all measures of the first-order constructs and the dimensions of the second-order constructs were high (≥ .86) (Table 1). The screening process shows that the data exhibited slight deviations from multinormality, however, all univariate kurtoses and skewnesses were within the range of [-1, 1]. Therefore, the maximum likelihood estimation method was used (Muthen and Kaplan 1995). As discussed previously, relationship quality was a high-order construct comprising four dimensions: trust; commitment; satisfaction; and, minimal opportunism. Trust and commitment were second-order constructs and satisfaction and minimal opportunism were first-order constructs. The CFA results indicate that these measurement models of these constructs fit the data well. Market and learning orientation were also second-order constructs, and export performance was a first-order construct. The CFA results also indicate that their measurement models fit the data well (Table 1). In addition, all factor loadings were high and substantial (the lowest loading was .59) (see the Appendix for the standardized factor loadings). These results indicate that the measures of all first-order constructs and all dimensions of second-order constructs were unidimensional and their convergent validity was achieved (Steenkamp and van Trijp 1991).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The correlations (with standard errors) between the dimensions of the second-order constructs indicate that they were significantly different from unity. Therefore, the within-construct discriminant validity was achieved (Steenkamp and van Trijp 1991) (Table 2). Because the measures of all first-order constructs and the dimensions of all second-order constructs were unidimensional, summates were used to the measurement model of relationship quality and the final measurement model. It is noted that two summates were used for minimal opportunism and satisfaction, and three summates was used for export performance. These summates were formed by randomly summing the indicators in each scale into groups, and each group was represented by one indicator. The use of two and three summates (instead of one) makes the model identified without using additional constraints and is referred to as partial disaggregation (Bagozzi and Edwards 1998). The CFA results of the measurement model of relationship quality fit the data well. The correlations (with standard errors) between the dimensions of relationship quality indicate that they were significantly different from unity. Therefore, the discriminant validity between the dimensions of relationship quality was also achieved. Finally, the final measurement model also received a good fit to the data. The correlations between constructs together with their standard errors indicate that they were significantly different from unity. These findings support the across-construct discriminant validity (Steenkamp and van Trijp 1991) (Table 2).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Test of Hypotheses

Rival Model. Before estimating the hypothesized model, it is important to establish that this model fits better than other plausible models (e.g., Bollen and Long, 1993). Therefore, we proposed a plausible rival model which specified one additional path (Hc): market orientation → export performance. The link between market orientation and business performance has been found by several studies (e.g., Narver and Slater 1990; Baker and Sinkula 1999; Meguc and Auh 2006). Because market orientation facilitates a firm's innovativeness (Hurley and Hult 1998), market-oriented firms are likely to look for opportunities in foreign markets, a business practice traditionally regarded as an innovation adoption process (Cavusgil 1980). In addition, the market-oriented firm tends to respond quickly to the complexity of foreign markets, resulting in a better performance in foreign markets.

Structural Results. The SEM results indicate that the hypothesized model received an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2_{[127]} = 189.36$ ($p = .000$); CFI = .983; GFI = .929; and, RMSEA = .042. In addition, all hypotheses were supported. Specifically, consistent with H1 and H2, positive impacts of both market orientation and learning orientation on relationship quality were found: $\beta = .27$ ($p < .01$) and $\gamma = .20$ ($p < .05$), respectively. Concerning H3, learning orientation was positively related to market orientation ($\gamma = .54$, $p < .001$). Finally, with regard to H4, relationship quality was positively related to export performance (β = .58, p <.001) (see Figure 2).

The test of the rival model also indicates that this model received a good fit to the data: $\chi^2_{[126]}$ = 185.34 (p =. 001); CFI = .984; GFI = .930; and RMSEA = .041. A chi-square difference test reveals that the rival model received a better fit than the proposed model: $\Delta\chi^2_{[\Delta df=1]}$ = 4.02; p < .05). In addition, in support of Hr, the relationship between market orientation and export performance, hypothesized to be zero in the proposed model, was found to be significant in the rival model (β= .12, p <.05). Consequently, the rival model was selected. Table 3 shows the unstandardized structural paths of the hypothesized and the rival models and Figure 2 shows the standardized structural paths of the rival (selected) model.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Multi-group Analysis

Duration of a relationship is a factor that may affect relationship quality. For example, Wray et al. (1994) found that duration of a relationship affect trust. However, Lagace et al. (1991) found no impact of relationship duration on any dimensions of relationship quality. In addition, firm-ownership structure has been considered an important factor that affects firm performance (e.g., Aulakh and Kotabe 1997; Luo et al. 2004). Moreover, the private sector has just been present in Vietnam recently. It is argued that the private sector is much more idiosyncratic behavior than the state-owned sector (Friedman 2004). Therefore, an additional purpose of the research is to examine any differences if existed, based on the duration of the relationship (new and more mature), and based on firm-ownership structure (state-owned and other types of ownership).

In order to compare the structural relationships in the model between the two groups of foreign importers (new relationships and more mature relationships with their foreign importers), and of firm-ownership structure (state-owned and other types of ownership), the multi-group analysis in SEM was utilized. It is noted that we measured firm ownership structure by a nominal scale (1: state-owned firms and 2: others) and duration of relationship by a ratio scale (number of years engaged in the relationship). Therefore, a median split was used to bifurcate the sample into new and more mature relationships. The new relationship group consisted of relationships that were less than or equal to five years. The more mature relationship group included relationships that had lasted for more than five years. Two steps of analysis were conducted. Firstly, these two samples were used to estimate the paths in the model with no structural paths constrained (Model A). Next, constraints were imposed for the structural paths for both groups, i.e., the paths between learning and market orientations, between learning orientation, market orientation and relationship quality, between market orientation and export performance, and between relationship quality and export performance, were set to be equal for both groups: new versus more mature relationships (Model B). This procedure was also utilized for firm-ownership structure. It is also noted that no constraints were set for the measurement models (partial invariance). In terms of relationship duration, the results of the multi-group analysis show that Model A ($\chi^2_{[252]}$ = 380.41) was selected over Model B ($\chi^2_{[257]}$ = 393.18) because it received a better fit: $\Delta\chi^2_{[5]}$ = 12.77 ($p < .05$). This result confirms the moderating effect of duration of relationship. Table 4 presents the structural paths of new and more mature relationships. In terms of firm-ownership structure, the results of the multi-group analysis show that Model B ($\chi^2_{[257]}$ = 343.19) was selected over Model A ($\chi^2_{[252]}$ = 335.44) because it received a better fit: $\Delta\chi^2_{[5]}$ = 7.75 ($p > .17$). This result indicates that firm-ownership structure of firm ownership did not moderate the relationships hypothesized in the model.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

The major objective of this study is to investigate key antecedents of the quality of business relationship between developing-economy exporters and their foreign importers. Following the resource-based view of the firm and extant research on market and learning orientations, we developed a model that explains the role of market and learning orientations in relationship quality, and subsequently, export performance. We also proposed an additional link between market orientation and export performance. The empirical findings support all of the hypotheses, substantially adding to the literature on the importance of adopting market and learning orientations, especially in the export-import relationship in developing economies.

Firstly, market and learning orientations are influential forces that drive an exporter to build and maintain strong relationships with its foreign partners. As forms of organizational culture, market and learning orientations are firm-level resources and are related to specific and routine processes that enable exporters to become competent in understanding and responding to their partners' needs. These competencies will create superior values to their foreign partners (Celuch et al. 2002; Hult et al. 2004; Yeniyurt et al. 2005). The effort of an exporter to understand and to satisfy its partner will also result in the partner's beliefs that the exporter is an expert in performing its obligations and behaves in the best interests of its import partner. Therefore, the import partner is likely to trust and commit to the working relationship with the exporter. As such, market and learning orientations will smooth the exporter-importer relationships and enhance the quality of these relationships, leading to high export performance. Consistent with the results found in advanced economies (e.g., (Calantone et al. 2002; Sanzo et al. 2003), the results of this study indicate that the role of market and learning orientations in relationship quality is not limited to advanced economies. Adopting and nurturing these orientations are important for exporters in developing economies who aim to strengthen business ties with foreign partners in competitive environments because these orientations are firm-level resources that create sustainable competitive advantage.

The results also indicate that learning orientation facilitates a market-oriented approach. A superior learning environment will leverage the use of all firm resources, including the behaviors that accompany a market orientation (Baker and Sinkula 1999). Moreover, developing economies like Vietnam (i.e., a transition economy where business values are still affected by a centrally-planned approach) a learning-oriented exporter tends to adopt a new way of looking at the market, involving a market-oriented approach. The exporter is likely to withdraw from its routine ways of doing business which have become embedded in its previous business approach. Therefore, exporters in developing economies, such as Vietnam, who wish to enhance relationship quality with their foreign partners, should dedicate themselves to learning orientations. In short, the importance of market and learning orientations for export firms is so crucial that managers should promote the culture of such orientations. The values and norms of such philosophy must be translated into specific actions in order to attain sustainable competitive advantage. This will strengthen the quality of relationships between them and their import partners, and thus, enhancing their export performance.

Further, the multigroup analysis results indicate that no significant difference between stated-own firms and firms with other types of ownership was found. This implies that adopting and nurturing market and learning orientations are equally important for exporters in both sectors in their efforts to establish high quality relationships with their foreign importers. Nevertheless, the results show that learning orientation plays its role in building high quality relationships for both new and mature relationships. Export managers should take this into consideration. At whatever stage of their business relationships, creating a learning-oriented environment can assist them to build and nurture the relationships with their foreign importers. However, the impacts of market orientation on both relationship quality and export performance are found to be significant only at the early stage of the relationship. This may be a particular characteristic of Vietnam, a developing and transition economy. Prior to the transformation into a market-oriented economy, all export activities of Vietnamese firms had been arranged by the Vietnamese government with other socialist governments within the Soviet trading block. The break-up of the Soviet trading block led to the liberalization of foreign trade by the Vietnamese government in 1989, creating an open economy in Vietnam. This requires Vietnamese firms to find new import partners because the Soviet trading block could no longer provide outlets for exports (Griffin 1998). Instead of focusing on production and relying primarily on the government, Vietnamese firms are now required to find their own export markets for their products. As such, market orientation plays an important role in the early stage of their relationships with foreign importers because market orientation facilitates an understanding between two parties. When their relationships are more mature, other investments such as asset specificity and innovativeness (e.g., Haugland 1999; Hult et al. 2004) may be more important, and market orientation may support these investments rather than directly enhances their relationships.

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, generalizability of the findings to other settings must be undertaken with the utmost caution because only one city in one developing economy was sampled. Replication and extension to other developing economies is a direction for future research. Secondly, limitations relate to the examination of the relationship from only one side of the dyad, the exporters. Establishment of the validity of the hypotheses is limited by the single model viewed from only the exporter side. Future research should consider the use of dyadic information. Further, the results of this study show that the impact of market orientation on relationship quality and export performance is not significant at the mature stage of the relationship. Therefore, other factors, such as asset specificity and innovativeness, can mediate this impact. Further research should examine possible mediators. Finally, the cross-sectional design employed inhibits strong inference regarding the direction of the causal relationships of the constructs. Longitudinal research designs would better enable researchers to make inferences about the causal sequence.

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Figure 1: A conceptual model

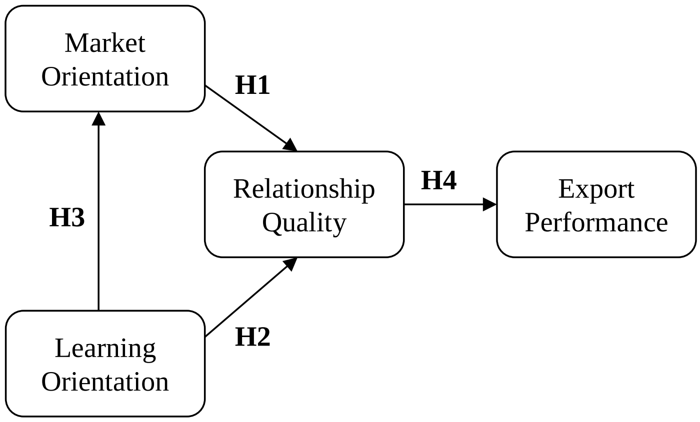
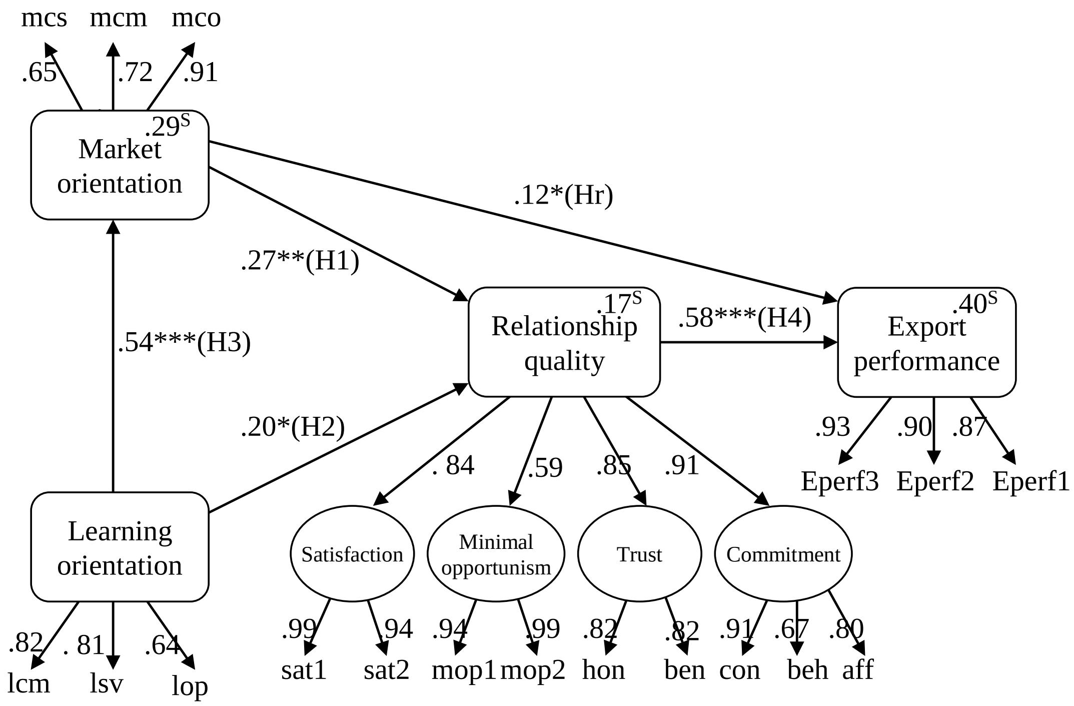


Figure 2: Structural results (standardized estimates)



$\chi^2_{(126)}$ = 185.34 (p = .000); CFI = .984; GFI = .930; RMSEA = .041
*: significant at $p < .05$; **:significant at $p < .01$; ***: significant at $p < .001$
Hr: hypothesized in the rival model; S: squared multiple correlations
For simplicity, indicators of second-order constructs are not shown

Table 1: Summary of scale validation

Constructs	Dimensions	Correlations			r(se)	α	ρ_c	ρ_{vc}
Market orientation: $\chi^2_{(87)}$ = 96.02 (p= .23); CFI = .997;GFI =.956; RMSEA =.019	Customer orientation (mcs)	mcs	$\leftrightarrow$	mcm	.53(.077)	.94	.97	.81
	Competitor orientation (mcm)	mcm	$\leftrightarrow$	mco	.74(.091)	.89	.94	.80
	Interfunctional coordination (mco)	mco	$\leftrightarrow$	mcs	.65(.085)	.87	.93	.76
Learning orientation: $\chi^2_{(41)}$ = 50.06 (p= .15); CFI = .996; GFI =.968; RMSEA =.028	Commitment to learning (lcm)	lcm	$\leftrightarrow$	lsv	.71(.086)	.92	.96	.85
	Shared vision (lsv)	lsv	$\leftrightarrow$	lop	.58(.083)	.91	.95	.83
	Open mindedness (lop)	lop	$\leftrightarrow$	lcm	.63(084)	.86	.92	.79
Trust: $\chi^2_{(208)}$ = 238.05 (p= .075); CFI = .991; GFI =.929; RMSEA =.023	Honesty (hon)	hon	$\leftrightarrow$	ben	.74(.101)	.94	.96	.69
	Benevolence (ben)					.89	.93	.58
Commitment: $\chi^2_{(227)}$ = 270.83 (p= .024);CFI = .989; GFI =.921; RMSEA =.026	Continuance (con)	con	$\leftrightarrow$	beh	.60(.089)	.93	.96	.81
	Behavioral (beh)	con	$\leftrightarrow$	aff	.79(.097)	.88	.92	.55
	Affective (aff)	aff	$\leftrightarrow$	beh	.68(.095)	.91	.95	.73
Minimal opportunism: $\chi^2_{(65)}$ = 77.62 (p= .135); CFI = .996; GFI =.960; RMSEA =.026						.96	.98	.79
Satisfaction: $\chi^2_{(14)}$ = 23.16 (p= .057); CFI = .996; GFI =.976; RMSEA =.048						.96	.98	.87
Export performance: $\chi^2_{(35)}$ = 39.15 (p= .288); CFI = .998; GFI =.973; RMSEA =.021						.92	.96	.73

Note: r(se): correlation (with standard error); α: Cronbach's apha; ρ_c : composite reliability; ρ_{vc}: average variance extracted.

Table 2: Correlations between constructs.

Measurement models	Correlation			r(se)
Relationship quality: $\chi^2_{(21)}$ = 28.07 (p= .138); CFI = .996; GFI =.978; RMSEA =.035	trust	↔	commitment	.80(.091)
	commitment	↔	minimal opportunism	.50(.073)
	minimal opportunism	↔	trust	.51(.078)
	satisfaction	↔	trust	.68(.082)
	satisfaction	↔	minimal opportunism	.52(.071)
	satisfaction	↔	commitment	.77(.080)
Final measurement model: $\chi^2_{(125)}$ = 185.28 (p= .000); CFI = .983; GFI =.930; RMSEA =.041	Market orientation	↔	Learning orientation	.54(.082)
	Learning orientation	↔	Relationship quality	.35(.076)
	Learning orientation	↔	Export performance	.25(.071)
	Relationship quality	↔	Export performance	.62(.082)
	Market orientation	↔	Export performance	.34(.071)
	Market orientation	↔	Relationship quality	.38(.074)

Note: r(se): correlation (with standard error)

Table 3: Unstandardized structural paths in the proposed and rival models

Structural paths			Proposed model		Competing model	
			Est(se)	p-value	Est(se)	p-value
Learning orientation	→	Market orientation	.56(.072)	.000	.56(.072)	.000
Learning orientation	→	Relationship quality	.23(.095)	.014	.23(.096)	.015
Market orientation	→	Relationship quality	.31(.091)	.000	.30(.092)	.001
Relationship quality	→	Export performance	.41(.041)	.000	.38(.044)	.000
Market orientation	→	Export performance	0*		.09(.044)	.046

Notes: Est(se): estimate (standard error); *: fixed at zero.

Table 4: Unstandardized structural paths of new and more mature relationships

Structural paths	New relationships		More mature relationships	
	Est(se)	**p-value**	**Est(se)**	**p-value**
Learning orientation → Market orientation	.44(.090)	0.000	.64(.119)	0.000
Learning orientation → Relationship quality	.22(.111)	0.047	.49(.157)	0.002
Market orientation → Relationship quality	.39(.117)	0.000	.10(.134)	0.451
Relationship quality → Export performance	.43(.059)	0.000	.28(.062)	0.000
Market orientation → Export performance	.15(.061)	0.015	.01(.062)	0.870

Notes: Est(se): estimate (standard error)

Appendix: CFA factor loadings of items (standardized)

Items	Loading	t-value
Market orientation (second-order, five-point Likert scale)		
Customer orientation		
We closely monitor and assess our level of commitment in serving customers' needs	.81	16.45
Business strategies are driven by the goal of increasing customer value	.81	16.43
Our competitive advantage is based on understanding customers' needs	.85	17.96
Our business objectives are driven by customer satisfaction	.86	18.10
We pay close attention to after-sales service	.87	18.44
We respond quickly to customer needs	.82	16.78
We rapidly adapt our products in response to customers' needs	.84	-
Competitor orientation		
In our firm, our sales people share information about competitors	.84	-
We respond rapidly to competitor actions	.80	15.54
Top management regularly discuss competitors' strengths and weaknesses	.87	17.62
Customers are targeted when we have an opportunity for competitive advantage	.79	15.27
Interfunctional coordination		
Our top managers from each business function regularly visit customers	.79	-
Business functions within our firm are integrated to serve our target market needs	.80	14.26
Our managers understand how employees can contribute to customers' value	.83	14.85
We share resources with other business units	.76	13.44
Learning orientation (second-order, five-point Likert scale)		
Commitment to learning		
Managers basically agree that our firm's ability to learn is the key to our competitive advantage	.85	-
The basic values of our firm include learning as a key to improvement	.87	18.51
In our firm, employee learning is an investment, not an expense	.88	18.87
Learning in our firm is seen as a key commodity necessary to guarantee organizational survival	.87	18.59
Shared vision		
There is a commonality of purpose in our firm	.82	-
There is total agreement on our organizational vision across all levels, functions, and divisions	.84	16.49
All employees are committed to the goals of our firm	.89	17.98
Employees view themselves as partners in charting the direction of our firm	.87	17.51
Open mindedness		
We are not afraid to reflect critically on the shared assumptions we have made about our markets	.81	-
Personnel in our firm realize that the very way they perceive the marketplace must be continually questioned	.84	14.70
We always collectively question our own biases about the way we interpret market information	.81	14.22
Trust (second-order, five-point Likert scale)		
Honesty		
Our firm has often provided importer A information that has later proven to be accurate	.71	-
Importer A has often provided us information that has later proven to be accurate	.69	11.15
Our firm usually keeps the promises we make to importer A	.75	12.17
Importer A usually keeps the promises they make to our firm	.74	11.94
Whenever our firm gives importer A advice on business operations, they know we are sharing our best judgment	.84	13.59
Whenever importer A gives us advice on business operations, we know they are sharing their best judgment	.76	12.32
Our firm can count on importer A to be sincere	.66	10.67
Our firm think that importer A can count on us to be sincere	.76	12.33
Our managers feel that the importer A offers our firm reliable recommendations	.80	13.03
Our firm offers to importer A reliable recommendations	.66	10.66
Our firm deals fairly and sincerely with importer A	.81	13.15
Our firm feels that importer A deals fairly and sincerely with our firm	.81	13.11
Benevolence		
Though circumstances change, our firm will be ready and willing to offer importer A an assistance and support	.69	-
When making important decisions, our firm is concerned about importer A's welfare	.59	9.13
When importer A share their problems with our firm, we will respond with understanding	.65	9.98
When it comes to things that are important to us, we can depend on importer A's support	.68	10.41
When we share our problems with importer A, we know that they will respond with understanding	.69	10.61
Though circumstances change, our firm believes that importer A will be ready and willing to offer us assistance and support	.71	10.91
When making important decisions, importer A is concerned about our firm's welfare	.77	11.76

When it comes to things that are important to us, importer A can depend on our firm's support	.70	10.72
We can count on importer A's decisions and actions which will be favorably affect us in the future	.63	9.77
Importer A can count on our firm's decisions and actions which will be favorably affect them in the future	.60	9.34
Commitment (second-order, five-point Likert scale)		
Continuance commitment		
We are going to continue the relationship with importer A for many years.	.76	-
We think that importer A is going to continue the relationship with our firm for many years.	.84	15.19
We expect the business relationship with importer A to last for a long time.	.89	16.36
Our firm is certain that our relationship with importer A will last a long time.	.90	16.51
Our firm believes that if another exporter offered importer A a better deal, they would take them on even if it meant dropping us.	.79	14.05
If another importer offered us a better deal, we would take them on even if it meant dropping importer A.	.82	14.80
Behavioral commitment		
We respond quickly to importer A's requests for help	.69	-
We think that the importer A responds quickly to our firm's requests for help	.63	9.61
We devote more time to importer A when they need help	.70	10.59
We adjust our marketing program for importer A when necessary	.54	8.40
We provide special aid to importer A when they are in trouble	.67	10.16
We provide customized product or services as requested by importer A	.62	9.47
We give advice and suggestions when importer A has problems	.60	9.23
We think that importer A devoted more time when we need help	.67	10.22
We think that importer A provided special aid to us when we were in trouble	.68	10.35
Importer A has given advice and suggestions when we have problems	.73	11.07
Affective commitment		
A high sense of unity exists between importer A and us	.77	-
Our relationship with importer A is a long-term alliance	.82	14.54
We have a strong business link with importer A	.79	13.95
We want to remain a member of importer A's network because we genuinely enjoy our relationship with them	.81	14.36
We think that importer A wants to remain a member of the our firm's business network because they genuinely enjoy their relationship with us	.75	13.21
We think importer A has developed a close business relationship with us	.81	14.39
Importer A and our firm share common business interests	.70	12.22
Minimal Opportunism		
We have always provided importer A with a completely truthful picture of our business	.78	-
Importer A has always provided our firm with a completely truthful picture of their business	.78	14.56
We carry out the duties of our relationships even if importer A does not check up on us	.79	14.69
Our firm think that importer A carries out the duties of relationships even if our firm does not check up on them	.81	15.24
We have never promised importer A that we would do things, that we actually had no intention of following through	.81	15.21
Importer A has never promised us that they would do things, that they actually had no intention of following through	.82	15.54
To get the necessary support from importer A, we rarely mask the true nature of our needs	.87	16.65
To get the necessary support from our firm, importer A rarely masks the true nature of their needs	.87	16.67
Regardless of its impact on importer A's business (e.g. profitability, sales volume, and market share), they always conscientiously perform their duties to us	.85	16.10
In order to get what importer A needs from our firm, importer A rarely changed the facts	.85	16.09
In order to get what we need from importer A, we have rarely changed the facts	.83	15.64
On rare occasions we have had to lie to importer A about certain things in order to protect our interests	.81	15.16
Satisfaction		
Overall, I believe we are both quite satisfied with our working relationship	.87	20.33
This is among the best importer relationships that our managers have experienced	.88	20.98
Our firm's relationship with importer A has been a happy one	.91	22.44
Our firm's relationship with importer A has fully met our firm's expectations	.86	20.00
Our firm is proud of having this working relationship with importer A	.89	21.65
We are very pleased with what this importer A does for us	.91	22.73
If we had to do it all over again, we would still choose to use the importer A	.87	-
Export Performance		
Profitability	.74	-
Sales revenue stability/ growth	.78	13.41
Improvement in market share	.81	14.05

Competitive advantage over other firms	.81	13.94
Economies of scale	.68	11.62
Overall survival of the firm	.73	12.53
Reputation	.83	14.40
Market development	.85	14.84
Product development	.81	14.00
Providing support and selling services	.69	11.80