

The Effects of Affiliation with Export Service-Providers on Sustainable Competitive Advantage: A Perspective of Small- and Medium-sized Exporters

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Abstract

Purpose – An appreciable number of small- and medium-sized exporters have continuously succeeded in their export marketplaces even though they do not possess enough resources. Advocating that affiliation with an export service-provider plays an important role in this phenomenon, we aimed to theoretically explain how export service providers' competences and relational factors drive small- and medium-sized exporters' competitive advantages in the long-run.

Design/methodology – Drawing prominently on the resource-based view and the relationship-marketing theory, we built an empirically testable model. The model showed the roles of exporter capabilities, export service-provider competences, and relational factors on small- and medium-sized exporters' sustainable competitive advantages.

Findings – The results of our research showed that exporter production and branding capabilities positively influenced their sustainable competitive advantage. In addition, export service-providers' marketing competence and relationship-building competence positively moderated the effects of exporter capabilities on their parties' sustainable competitive advantages. Finally, affiliation parties' interfirm trust and relationship commitment positively moderated the effects of export service-provider competence on the relationship between exporter capabilities and sustainable competitive advantages.

Originality/value – Although prior studies have highlighted the effects of an exporter's resources on export performance, our research filled a knowledge gap of the effects of other resources on export performance. First, we proposed two types of export service-provider, competence marketing and relationship-building, influencing exporters' competitive advantage. Second, the effects of relational factors were proposed in the context of export affiliations.

Keywords: Capability, Competence, Competitive Advantage, Export, Relationship, Service

JEL Classifications: M13, M16, M41

1. Introduction

As globalization increases, exporting is a useful vehicle for a small- or medium-sized firm to enter an overseas market and enhance business performance. Therefore, it has become of significant interest of research in marketing academia (Cavusgil and Kirpalani, 1993; Samiee and Ankar, 1998). Research has responded to marketing managers' and policymakers' interests by paying attention to the drivers of exporter success (Aaby and Slater, 1989; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Szymanski, Bharadwaj and Varadarajan, 1993). In spite of increased attention, the knowledge on exporting remains limited and provides few insights for

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marketing managers that are in charge of exporter Long-term success (Czinkota, 2000; Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000).

A review of literature reveals two significant limitations within extant research. First, researchers have little highlighted the Long-term benefits of export marketing. This is a critical gap in the sense that attaining business sustainability remains an important concern for exporters. Second, few studies identified export affiliation as a unit of analysis (for exceptions, see Ambler, Styles and Xiucum, 1999; Myers, 1999, Oh Han-Mo, 2012); many studies employ a Firm-level unit of analysis by aggregating an exporter's assorted product-market activities (Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000; Madsen, 1987). This approach makes it difficult to capture specific factors that influence exporter competitive advantage in the sense that Firm-level analyses may little uncover the effects of affiliation with an export service-provider on export performance (Ambler, Styles and Xiucum, 1999; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Oh Han-Mo, 2012/2014). In reality, an appreciable number of small- and medium-sized exporters have continuously succeeded in their export marketplaces even though they do not possess good enough resources. These exporters depend often on export service-providers, such as export trading companies and export management companies, in competing in their export marketplaces. Accordingly, the export affiliation should be identified as a key unit of analysis in research that focuses on exporters' outcomes (Ambler, Styles and Xiucum, 1999; Myers, 1999). Third, most studies depend on the assumption that export-marketers' resource-input immediately or concurrently create return. Nevertheless, this assumption is not always valid. In essence, the effect of resource-output in export marketing occurs over time. Accordingly, we need to investigate the time-varying effects of variables associated with export marketing.

Our study addresses this issue. We provide a model that explains how export service providers' competences and relational factors drive small- and medium-sized exporters' competitive advantages for a long-run. Drawing prominently on the resource-based view and the relationship-marketing theory, we built an empirically testable model. The model showed the roles of exporter capabilities, export service-provider competences, and relational factors on small- and medium-sized exporters' sustainable competitive advantages.

The rest of this manuscript begins by describing theoretical foundations. Next, a conceptual framework was developed. The following chapter presents a model explaining how export service providers' competences and relational factors drive small- and medium-sized exporters' competitive advantages in the long-run. Finally, our manuscript concludes with a discussion of the results of the current research, implications for theory and practice, and limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The resource-based theory of the firm and the relationship-marketing theory hold the potential to explain the effects of the relationship between an exporter and an export service-provider on competitive advantage in the export marketplace. The resource-based theory of the firm supports the notion that exporter competitive advantage can occur through its and partners' resources. The relationship-marketing theory supports the belief that relational factors, including trust and commitment, can enhance the effects of resources on competitive advantage.

2.1. Resource-based View

The resource-based view underscores the effects of resources on competitive advantage. Resources are tangible or intangible, and are available for an exporter to efficiently and effectively produce a product that has value for a target market (Hunt and Morgan, 1995). A

company's resource-set seems unique in the sense that resources are substantially heterogeneous across companies. In addition, resource heterogeneity among competitors may persevere over time and demonstrate performance diversity in the sense that some resources are imperfectly migratory (Das and Teng, 2000; Dierickx and Cool, 1989).

Exporters gain access to resources by developing them unilaterally or reciprocally, through mergers and acquisitions, and through export affiliations (Hunt, 2000; Morrow et al., 2007). An export's affiliation success is significantly influenced through resources that each party contributes to this affiliation and the level to which the affiliation creates new resources (Das and Teng, 2000; Jap, 1999; Park, Mezas and Song, 2004). Not only supplementary resources but also complementary resources are essential to export affiliation success (Sarkar et al., 2001). In addition to resources that partners bring to an export affiliation, idiosyncratic resources can be developed during the span of an export affiliation, generated through a combination of partners' respective resources, and (3) are unique to the relationship (Jap, 1999). When partners develop an idiosyncratic resource by integrating resources, a synergistic effect can occur, thereby generating value (Lambe, Spekman and Hunt, 2002).

2.2. Relationship Marketing Theory

The relationship marketing theory proposes that certain attributes of a relationship generate successful relational exchanges (Mehta et al., 2006). These attributes include interfirm trust (Sivadas and Dwyer, 2000; Smith and Barclay, 1997; Weitz and Bradford, 1999) and commitment to affiliation (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpandé, 1992). As to export affiliations, trust and relationship commitment are the requirements of successful relational exchanges; without trust and commitment, there can be no relationships (Spekman, Isabella and MacAvoy, 2000). In addition, export affiliations can be based on the premise that ventures often cooperate to compete (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Export affiliations characterized through effective communication create interfirm trust that often leads to cooperation (Sarkar et al., 2001). Effective cooperation enables partners to successfully combine their resources and capabilities in ways of contributing to the establishment of competitive advantage (Madhok and Tallman, 1998). Accordingly, the relationship marketing theory suggests that export affiliations characterized through trust and commitment can be more successful than those relationships with little trust and commitment.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1. Exporter Capability

An exporter's capability may lead to a competitive advantage. For exporters, two key capabilities are production capability and branding capabilities.

3.1.1. Production Capability

For exporters, production capability refers to a set of fundamental skills and technologies to attain export performance (Azzone and Rangone, 1996). An exporter's production capability is a higher-order resource (Hunt, 2000). The production capability is formed by combining multiple facets, including conformance capability (Ferdows and De Meyer, 1990), delivery competence (New, 1992; Noble, 1995), competitiveness of production cost (Ferdows and De Meyer, 1990), and flexibility (Hill and Chambers, 1991). Capable exporters are able to utilize their resources creating products for their target markets while they maintain flexibility in their processes (Krasnikov and Jayachandran, 2008). These exporters can

develop knowledge and skills that lead them to reduce costs and/or deliver more value to their target markets (Roth and Miller, 1992).

3.1.2. Branding Capability

For exporters, branding is the process of providing products with the power of a brand for their target markets (Kotler and Keller, 2016). There are three main purposes of branding for an exporter. The first important purpose is product identification. Branding enables exporters to distinguish their products from competitors. An exporter's brand name can signal the quality of its product (Aaker, 1991). Second, branding is necessary to generate repeat foreign sales for exporters. Branding can help buyers identify products they want to purchase again, and avoid products they do not (Lamb, Hair and McDaniel, 2018). Third, branding is essential to promote new product sales. Marking a well-known and respected name is useful in exporting new products (Lamb, Hair and McDaniel, 2018). Accordingly, developing brand capability should be a top management priority for exporters (Aaker, 1991; Fournier, 1998; Keller, 2003; Morgan and Rego, 2009).

3.2. Export Service-Provider Competence

Sustainable export performance depends not only on exporter capabilities but also on the export service-provider's competence. Two key competences of an export service-provider are marketing competence and relationship-building competence.

3.2.1. Marketing Competence

Marketing competence can be defined as organized and structured information about exporting (Li and Calantone, 1998). Export service-providers can gain this competence by developing the capability of learning from their export environments, disseminating this learning throughout their organizations, and strategically using that learning as knowledge (Hunt and Morgan, 1995). Export marketing competence is often tacit knowledge in the sense that it comes from learning by doing (Oh, 2013; Wittmann, Hunt and Arnett, 2009). In addition, this knowledge is generally difficult to be codified and communicated (Kogut and Zander, 1992; Oh, 2013; Polanyi, 1966; Reed and DeFillippi, 1990). Moreover, export service ventures spend time to accumulate this knowledge. Finally, this knowledge is complex in that it is a combination and integration of a wide variety of other resources (Zollo and Winter, 2002). In export marketing, if an exporter has high degree of export marketing competence, it can achieve a better level of export performance than one with less competence (Aaby and Slater, 1989). Given that exporters cannot always have sufficient export marketing competence, they need to collaborate with export service-providers that possess knowledge from experienced overseas market operations in the sense that the knowledge can be a fundamental resource for exporters' competitive advantages in their export marketplaces (Albaum, Strandskov and Duerr, 2016; Ambler, Styles and Xiucum, 1999; Erramilli, 1991).

3.2.2. Relationship-building Competence

An export service-provider's relationship-building competence refers to its ability to identify, develop, and manage relationships with key stakeholders in the export marketplace (Arnett and Badrinarayanan, 2005). Relationship-building competence is often tacit, complex, and firm-specific (Arnett and Badrinarayanan, 2005). For export service ventures, two sorts of relationship-building competence can be considered: buyer relationship-building competence and supplier relationship-building competence. In export marketing, a buyer relationship-building competence entails an export service venture's ability to understand

foreign buyers' needs, wants, and demands and to establish, develop, and sustain close relationships with buyers (Piercy, Katsikeas and Cravens, 1997). Similarly, a supplier relationship-building competence involves an export service venture's ability to recognize attractive sources of supply, and to establish, develop, and sustain strong relationships with suppliers (Katsikeas, 1998).

3.3. Relational Factors

The present study considers two relational factors: interfirm trust and affiliation commitment. These two factors can lead to an exporter's Long-term success.

3.3.1. *Interfirm Trust*

For export affiliations, interfirm trust can be defined as an intangible entity existing when a party maintains confidence in its export partner's integrity and reliability (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Interfirm trust can constitute a critical factor in successful export affiliations in the sense that interfirm trust can offer a foundation for future cooperation (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987). In fact, export affiliations that lack interfirm trust are difficult to sustain (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). Accordingly, an export service-provider's interfirm trust is crucial for an exporter to have export affiliation with a party.

3.3.2. *Affiliation Commitment*

For export affiliations, affiliation commitment can be defined as an enduring desire for exporters and export service-providers to maintain a valuable affiliation (Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpandé, 1992). Affiliation commitment is often regarded as the basis of all successful, Long-term relationships (Gundlach, Achrol and Mentzer, 1995). Accordingly, an export service-provider's affiliation commitment is a key element for an exporter to have an export affiliation with a party.

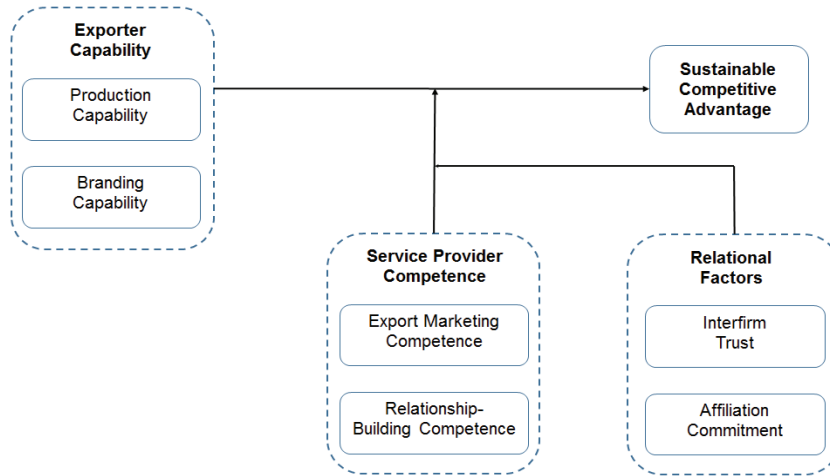
4. Model Development

4.1. Propositional Development

The present study develops propositions for exporters to achieve competitive advantages through export affiliations. Fig. 1 depicts a model explaining the roles of exporter capabilities, export service-provider competences, and relational factors on small- and medium-sized exporters' sustainable competitive advantages.

Because a production capability contains multiple facets and is a higher-order resource, it can be a driver of sustainable competitive advantage for an exporter that maintains it (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991; Dutta, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997). On one hand, an exporter with production capability can improve its efficiency, an important characteristic of its competitive advantage. In effect, an exporter's production capability can be benchmarked and codified internally. These internal benchmarks and codifications enable the exporter to enhance its processes over time, thereby resulting in cost savings (Krasnikov and Jayachandran, 2008). On the other hand, an exporter with a production capability can deliver more value, another important characteristic of competitive advantage. In fact, an exporter's production manifests itself in numerous valuable outcomes in its target market, such as performance-enhancements in quality, dependability, flexibility, and delivery (Ferdows and De Meyer, 1990; Leong, Snyder and Ward, 1990; Oh Han-Mo, 2013/2014). Thus, it is posited that:

Fig. 1. A Model of the Effects of Affiliation with an Export Service-Provider on Sustainable Competitive Advantage



P1: An exporter's production capability has a positive effect on its sustainable competitive advantage.

Branding capability is a major driver of export performance (Roth, 1995; Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden, 2003). In reality, the rise of global competition has placed an emphasis on exporters' branding strategies (Gordon, Calantone and Di Benedetto, 1993). Branding capability is related to factors that allow exporters to reduce costs and deliver more value to buyers. In fact, well-known brands require less investment in launching a new product and are more likely to obtain wider distribution than little known brands (Kay, 2006; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Tauber, 1988). Moreover, exporters with a high brand capability are able to employ more premium pricing strategies, benefit from efficiency and effectiveness in their export marketing programs, realize large margins, obtain great product demands and degrees of buyer-satisfaction, hold more leverage in negotiations, and are little vulnerable to competitors' maneuvers (Aaker, 1992; Bendixen et al., 2004). Therefore, it is posited that:

P2: An exporter's brand capability has a positive effect on its sustainable competitive advantage.

An export service-provider's export marketing competence can be a driver of its partner's sustainable competitive advantage. Export service providers with great export marketing competence hold an edge (Dutton and Thomas, 1984). An export service-provider's experiential learning leads its partner to improving existing routines in exporting situations (Levitt and March, 1988). In addition, exporters can increase their effectiveness through the export marketing competence of their partners: export service-providers. For an exporter contemplating entry into an unfamiliar overseas market, a business relationship with an export service venture that holds export marketing expertise provides the exporter with unique and valuable resources. Export service ventures with substantial know-how in export processes can exploit their accumulated knowledge from prior decisions, actions, and mistakes to inform their partners (i.e., exporters) of opportunities and threats (Pfeffer and

Sutton, 2006). In effect, export service-providers' know-how on export marketing enables an exporter to locate overseas buyers efficiently and effectively (Peng and Ilinitch, 1998). Thus, it is posited that:

- P3: An export service-provider's export marketing competence positively moderates the effect of its partner's production capability on its partner's sustainable competitive advantage.*
P4: An export service-provider's export marketing competence positively moderates the effect of its partner's branding capability on its partner's sustainable competitive advantage.

An export service-provider's relationship-building competence can enable its partner (i.e., an exporter) to achieve a competitive advantage (Kaleka, 2002, Morgan and Hunt, 1994, Morgan, Vorhies and Schlegelmilch, 2006, Peng and York, 2001). In one respect, an export service-provider's customer relationship-building competence enables its partner to reduce costs by focusing on developing valuable products for foreign buyers (Flint, Woodruff and Gardial, 1997). Likewise, an export service-provider's supplier relationship-building competence enables its partner to efficiently handle procurement activities (Sheth and Sharma, 1997). In another respect, an export service-provider's relationship-building competence allows its partner to deliver much value. Exporters with a customer relationship-building competence can develop market offerings that fulfill foreign buyers' requirements better than do their rivals (Bello, Urban and Verhage, 1991; Ganitsky, 1989). Furthermore, a customer relationship-building competence enhances an understanding of foreign buyers' service requirements (Greenley, 1995; Narver and Slater, 1990). Similarly, an export service-provider's capability for building Long-term relationships with a supplier can contribute to its partner's development of better products (Collis and Montgomery, 1995; Grant, 1998). In addition, an export service-provider's capability for building strong supplier relationships can ensure the consistent delivery of the proper degree of service quality for foreign buyers (Ganesan, 1994; Piercy, 1997). Therefore, it is posited that:

- P5: An export service-provider's relationship-building competence positively moderates the effect of its partner's production capability on its partner's sustainable competitive advantage.*
P6: An export service-provider's relationship-building competence positively moderates the effect of its partner's branding capability on its partner's sustainable competitive advantage.

In an export affiliation, a party's trustworthy behaviors are an essential condition for an enriched, significant, and sustained exchange of knowledge between parties (Muthusamy, White and Carr, 2007). In effect, when a party trusts its partner, the party is more willing to cooperate. In export affiliations, interfirm trust enhances the scope of planning and action between parties (Gassenheimer, Houston and Manolis, 2004; Muthusamy, White and Carr, 2007). Once interfirm trust is established, parties make coordinated and joint efforts that may generate outcomes that surpass what they would achieve by themselves. Accordingly, interfirm trust can increase both firms cooperation (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Lancaster and Lages, 2006). Thus, it is posited that:

- P7: An export service-provider's interfirm trust positively moderates the effect of its marketing competence on the relationship between its partner's production capability and sustainable competitive advantage.*
P8: An export service-provider's interfirm trust positively moderates the effect of its marketing competence on the relationship between its partner's branding capability and sustainable

competitive advantage.

P9: An export service-provider's interfirm trust positively moderates the effect of its relationship-building competence on the relationship between its partner's production capability and sustainable competitive advantage.

P10: An export service-provider's interfirm trust positively moderates the effect of its relationship-building competence on the relationship between its partner's branding capability and sustainable competitive advantage.

For export affiliations, relationship commitment offers a solid basis from which additional attributes crucial to developing relationships can be built on. In effect, an export service-provider committing to an export affiliation would cooperate with another party owing to a desire to produce relationship work (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Committed export service-providers view cooperation as a vehicle to build, sustain, bolster, and deepen relationships. Therefore, it is posited that:

P11: An export service-provider's affiliation commitment positively moderates the effect of its marketing competence on the relationship between its partner's production capability and sustainable competitive advantage.

P12: An export service-provider's affiliation commitment positively moderates the effect of its marketing competence on the relationship between its partner's branding capability and sustainable competitive advantage.

P13: An export service-provider's affiliation commitment positively moderates the effect of its relationship-building competence on the relationship between its partner's production capability and sustainable competitive advantage.

P14: An export service-provider's affiliation commitment positively moderates the effect of its relationship-building competence on the relationship between its partner's branding capability and sustainable competitive advantage.

4.2. Model Specification

A regression model was used to estimate the proposed effects. The following equation is for production capability, branding capability, marketing competence, relationship-building competence, inter-firm trust, and affiliation commitment:

$$PC_t = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1(t) + \gamma_2(t)^2 + \epsilon_t, \quad (1)$$

where PC and t denote production capability and a year, respectively.

We might employ a similar procedure for interpolating the measures for branding capability, marketing competence, relationship-building competence, inter-firm trust, and affiliation commitment. If we have the annual values for an exporter's production capability and branding capability, an export service-provider's marketing competence, relationship-building competence, inter-firm trust, and affiliation commitment, we might estimate the time-varying effects of these factors on the exporter's business performance with the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} EP_{jtk} = & \beta_{0k} + \beta_{1k}EP_{j(t-1)k} + \beta_{2k}PC_t + \beta_{3k}BC_t + \beta_{4k}MC_t + \beta_{5k}RC_t + \beta_{6k}IT_t + \\ & \beta_{7k}AC_t + \beta_{9k}(PC \times EC)_t + \beta_{10k}(PC \times RC)_t + \beta_{11k}(BC \times EC)_t + \\ & \beta_{12k}(BC \times RC)_t + \beta_{13k}(PC \times EC \times IT)_t + \beta_{14k}(PC \times EC \times AC)_t + \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} & \beta_{15k}(PC \times RC \times IT)_t + \beta_{16k}(PC \times RC \times AC)_t + \beta_{17k}(BC \times EC \times IT)_t + \\ & \beta_{18k}(BC \times EC \times AC)_t + \beta_{19k}(BC \times RC \times IT)_t + \beta_{20k}(BC \times RC \times AC)_t + \\ & \epsilon_{jtk}, \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

where $k=1$ if sales is used as the dependent variable, and $k=2$ if profit is used as the dependent one; BC=branding capability; MC=marketing competence; RC=relationship-building competence; IT=inter-firm trust; AC=affiliation commitment; EP_{jkt} =export performance at time t for industry j .

We used the following equation to capture the time-varying effect of key factors:

$$\beta_{itk} = a_{ik} + b_{ik} \ln(\text{time}) + \delta_{ik}, \quad (3)$$

where i denotes the coefficients for the variables associated in the model.

We may estimate Equations (2) and (3) as a hierarchical linear model. Nonetheless, we may estimate them jointly. Our model specification can be a cross-section of time-series models. We modeled export outcome at time t (EP_{jtk}) as a function of lagged export outcome ($EP_{j(t-1)k}$). In our model, (β_{2tk}) can measure both the short-term effect of exporter production-capability and the delayed effect on export performance.

5. Discussion

Our study contains several implications for theory. First, to explain and predict exporters' Long-term success, we theoretically incorporated the resource-based view and the relationship-marketing theory. By integrating the two theories, our study helps fill the need for the developing of export marketing theory. Specifically, we supported the premise that the resource-based view offers a solid ground for exporter Long-term success. Second, our study supports the explanation power of the resource-based view in the context of export affiliation. Indeed, we suggested that two dimensions of export capability (i.g., production capability and branding capability) lead an exporter to accomplishing a sustainable competitive advantage in the export marketplace. Third, our study can contribute to the literature on relationship marketing. In particular, we illustrated that an export service-provider's interfirm trust and affiliation commitment influence its partner's long-run success in their export marketplaces. An understanding of the roles of these relational factors in export affiliations is invaluable in the sense there have been few studies considering the two types of relational factors in the exporting context.

Our study maintains important implications for export marketing practice. First, we pointed out the importance of export service-providers' marketing competence and relationship-building competence. If an export service-provider possesses complementary knowledge on and experience with export marketing, its partner would be able to leverage performance differences, generate synergies, and thereby, attain a competitive advantage in the export marketplace for a long period. Second, our study posited that an export service-provider's relationship-building competence has a positive effect on the sustainable competitive advantage of its partner. Accordingly, it is important for an exporter to identify an export service-provider as part of its relationship-based export marketing strategy. Third, our model strengthens the relational factor's view that interfirm trust and affiliation commitment can contribute directly to competitive advantage. In effect, an export service-

provider's interfirm trust and affiliation commitment can contribute indirectly to the sustainable competitive advantage of its partner by positively moderating the effects of its competence on the relationship between the capability of its partner and the advantage. When two parties in an export affiliation behavior is trustworthy and committed, they are more likely to create idiosyncratic advantage-producing resources. Accordingly, the investment that an exporter makes in building an affiliation with an export service-provider will likely generate a positive return.

Our study holds certain limitations in that no empirical assessment has been performed to test the proposed model. Accordingly, a natural next level should be to empirically examine the model. Moreover, this study could be extended in the following ways. First, future research could consider whether export-relationship types (e.g., medium-sized exporter versus small-sized export service venture, small-sized exporter versus small-sized export service venture) moderate the links proposed in the model. Second, future studies could consider various types of export service-providers such as export agencies, export management companies, and export trading companies. Third, further studies could extend the proposed model with other variables that would influence exporter success in export marketplaces. Potential candidates are export service-providers' negotiation competence and environmental scanning, exporters' social capital, financial capital, cultural resources, and different relational factors, such as shared values and propensity to stay. Finally, future endeavors should involve gathering dyadic or triadic data in the sense that an export affiliation involves more than two parties working together.

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