

Directions for Advancing Export Marketing Theory in the Asia Pacific Region: What Can We Learn from Research in Other Regions of the World?

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to present directions for advancing export marketing theory in the Asia Pacific Region. To do so, I build on recent research in other regions of the world. Additionally, I build on exploratory findings on the exporting dynamics and processes used by exporting firms based in a European country (Portugal) that has suffered an “export boom” in the last two decades. My findings suggest that future export marketing research should better explore the relationships among past export performance, current export decision making and current performance. Moreover, in addition to a better understanding of the determinants of long-term export performance, a better understanding of short-term determinants is also required. Discussion centers on the research and managerial implications of these findings.

Keywords: past performance, short-term performance, export performance, measurement, exporting, international marketing, marketing strategy.

Introduction

Despite the four decades of research on export performance (see: Tookey, 1964 as the pioneering work), there are still many research avenues underdeveloped. In this paper I explore three of those existing research avenues: 1) export performance measurement (see: Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000; Lages and Lages, 2004), 2) determinants of export performance (see: Leonidou, Katsikeas and Samiee, 2002, Zou and Stan 1998) and 3) export performance consequences (Lages and Jap, 2003; Lages and Montgomery, 2004).

Recent articles (e.g., Madsen, 1998; Lages and Jap, 2003; Lages and Lages, 2004) argue that one of the major problems for export marketing theory development is the fact that research is often not aligned with managers' views and interests. This concern has recently been confirmed by a special issue of the Marketing Science Institute and Journal of Marketing Research (MSI/JMR, 2003) in which was declared that there is an increasing concern about the divergence between the research conducted by international marketing research academics and managers' reality. Two possible reasons for this divergence might be the small number of qualitative studies and the fact that researchers tend to look to the same phenomenon over and over again (e.g. determinants of export performance and long-term performance) without even questioning existing approaches or considering new ones (e.g. export performance consequences and short-term performance). With this in mind, I develop herein an exploratory study to better understand which elements are perceived by exporting managers as being essential in terms of exporting operations. Although partially driven by the literature, this study will be qualitative and

mainly inductive in order to better explore the knowledge needs of export marketing managers.

This paper is organized as follows. First, I present a brief review of the export performance literature dealing with three export performance topics previously mentioned: 1) export performance measurement, 2) determinants of export performance and 3) export performance consequences. Then, I present the method section as well as the findings of an exploratory study conducted with export marketing managers. The paper ends with suggestions for further research in the Asia Pacific Region.

Recent theoretical perspectives on export performance

Export performance measurement

Researchers have been using many different measures to assess export performance, as no consensus exists about its conceptual and operational definitions (Zou, Taylor and Osland, 1998; Lages and Lages, 2004). The most recent literature recommends that the *aggregation* of various performance measures into a single measure of export performance partially overcomes the difficulty of performance measurement (Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000).

In terms of mode of export performance assessment, research might use objective and subjective indicators. There are several factors supporting the use of a subjective approach to performance measurement. For research purposes, it is often impossible to establish a common definition or fixed reference point across firms. Financial success for one company may constitute failure for another. This might be because performance itself is a complex construct in the view of the firm (Greve, 1998). Managers tend to use their own perceptions of performance, rather than objective values, in order to formulate their decisions (Bourgeois, 1980). Although objective assessments in measuring actual export performance may be regarded as trustworthy, this type of approach may raise different measurement problems. As indicated by Styles (1998), since samples are often drawn from a heterogeneous population of exporting firms, the researcher—as opposed to managers—usually fixes the imaginary boundary line between success and failure. A second measurement problem is that some measures (e.g. profitability, ROI, cash-flow) might raise comparability problems due to different accounting practices across firms. A third practical concern is that company reports and financial statements rarely distinguish between the domestic and export markets operations, and even more rarely provide specific information on the different export ventures. Moreover, obtaining accurate financial data on export performance is a difficulty acknowledged by researchers, because export managers might be unwilling to respond openly and effectively to absolute values (Katsikeas, Piercy and Ionnidis, 1996; Yang, Leone and Alden, 1992). Finally, both stakeholders and managers may have different opinions about which operational measures to use when setting targets and, hence, it becomes very difficult to find agreement on how to use financial measures to assess export performance (Madsen, 1998) because performance assessment is often idiosyncratic to the type of firm and its setting.

All these reasons might explain why subjective measures have been proven to be extremely valid in measuring export performance and in determining the manner in which performance is associated with managerial decisions (see Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000: 505). Within this line, just very recently, a new measurement scale of export performance has been presented (Lages and Lages, 2004). This work looks at performance from a different perspective. More specifically, it presents a new measurement scale to assess Short-Term Export Performance (the STEP scale) that incorporates 1) satisfaction with short-term performance improvement; 2) short-term exporting intensity improvement; and 3) expected short-term performance improvement over a one-year period. Satisfaction with short-term performance improvement was defined as a compound psychological variable (an affective state) assessing the effectiveness of a marketing program in terms of its sales, profitability, and market share, as well as overall performance (cf. Bonoma and Clark, 1988) from one year to the next. The dimension "short-term exporting intensity improvement" was used to assess managers' perceived change in the importance of the exporting activity (in terms of sales volume and profitability) to a firms' overall performance from one year to the next. The third dimension of the STEP scale was "expected short-term performance improvement", as this approach helps to gain insight into the export performance phenomenon while taking into consideration the "time horizon" dimension (cf. Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000).

Determinants of marketing strategy and export performance

This stream of research is a particularly interesting and timely topic, particularly if we consider that firms' survival and growth, and the consequent economic growth of many countries, is strongly dependent on a better understanding of the key factors *influencing* firms' exporting performance. Although several studies have provided insights into export marketing strategy and export performance, a limited number of studies has attempted to examine *all* the interrelationships among these areas, namely, the causal relationships between 1) internal and external factors, 2) export marketing strategy, and 3) export marketing performance (see as exceptions: Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; O'Cass and Julian, 2003; Lages and Jap, 2003; Lages and Montgomery, 2004).

Most studies in this field assert that export performance is *directly* affected by internal factors (e.g., Donthu and Kim, 1993; Holzmuller and Kasper, 1991; Louter, Ouwerkerk and Bakker, 1991; Madsen, 1989) and external forces (e.g., Donthu and Kim, 1993; Holzmuller and Kasper, 1991; Louter, Ouwerkerk and Bakker, 1991; Madsen, 1989). However, according to some empirical studies (Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Hoang, 1998), there are at *least* some internal factors that have an *indirect* effect on export performance. These investigations show that there is a significant relationship between export performance and export marketing strategy, which, in turn, is determined by some internal factors. Cavusgil and Zou's (1994) investigation reveals that there is a *direct* relationship between commitment to a venture and export performance, as well as an *indirect* relationship. On the other hand, while there is a *direct* relationship between international competence and export performance, there is no *indirect* relationship. Hoang's (1998) investigation also points out that, depending on the nature of the factors, export performance may be af-

affected directly and/or indirectly. Hoang's (1998) findings revealed that export performance is influenced *indirectly*, rather than directly, by some internal factors (i.e., size, level of business experience, marketing research and planning). However, with regard to a specific factor (i.e., the intensity of international involvement) a *direct* relationship can be established. Cavusgil and Zou's (1994) work also points out that export performance is affected *indirectly* by external factors. Indeed, the external factors have solely an indirect effect on export performance through their impact on export marketing strategy.

Hence, while building on these findings, Lages (2000) calls attention to the fact that research should better explore the *indirect* relationship in addition to the analysis of possible direct relationships. To do so, it is proposed a conceptual model that involves the analysis of the *indirect* impact of both internal and external factors on export performance, while considering the mediating effects of marketing strategy.

The effects of prior export performance

As previously discussed, quite a number of empirical studies have already been developed concerning the determinants of export performance (see: Leonidou, Katsikeas and Samiee, 2002; Zou and Stan, 1998). Surprisingly, and despite the extensive research on this topic, only a few studies in the marketing field have analyzed the reverse relationship, i.e. the consequences of past export performance results.

While building on the perceptions of European export managers, a recent qualitative study (Lages, Lages and Lages, 2003) indicates that the main consequences of previous performance results are: a) need to seek performance improvement as a result of bad performance, b) maintain strategy as a result of good performance, c) market diversification, d) focus on competition, e) product diversification, f) quality, and more attention to g) macro and h) micro factors.

Another empirical study (Lages and Montgomery, 2004) on small and medium-sized exporters reveals that past performance is also very likely to shape the degree of commitment to exporting. This might occur because export commitment is a function of resource availability (Cavusgil and Nevin, 1981). When firms' commitment to the exporting venture increases, more resources are allocated to the exporting activity, and consequently the firm will be able to improve its planning procedures and implement more adaptive strategies. Moreover, when the firm performs well, internal publics (e.g. top managers, employees, union representatives) and external publics (e.g. clients/customers, suppliers, investors, and credit institutions) are more likely to react favorably (Isen and Baron, 1991) to the exporting activity. This suggests that as past performance improves, commitment increases, which in turn has an impact on the definition of the marketing strategy.

Finally, another recent study (Lages and Jap, 2003) found that while performance satisfaction feeds performance improvement in the following year, both the previous year's export intensity and its export performance achievement produce a negative impact on current period performance improvement. Moreover, the level of export intensity in the previous year facilitates marketing strategy adaptation in

the short term. However, satisfaction with the previous year's performance negatively influences the degree of distribution adaptation. These findings confirm the relevance of prior performance to the current definition of marketing strategy elements. Moreover, they show that current performance varies in the short term depending on the dimension of export performance being considered.

Methodology

Although partially driven by the literature, this research was mainly inductive. This approach is similar to that used in grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in which, through a set of procedures, it is possible to develop 'grounded theory' about what is observed in the field (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This is more appropriate when the investigator intends to answer "how" questions (Yin, 1994), such as "how to assess export performance?", "how does past performance relate with current strategy and actions?" and "how do companies achieve export performance?". Hence, twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers responsible for the export operations of Portuguese exporting firms. These managers were used for inductive research and to further investigate the relationships indicated by the literature. This allowed us to gather and present preliminary data about the exporting dynamics and processes.

There are two key reasons supporting research into the Portuguese exporters: (1) the Portuguese exporters' growth, and (2) the growing importance of Portuguese companies in the international arena. Several authors have discussed the export development of Portugal during the last decades. For example, in 1993, Rosa calls attention to the fact that the Portuguese GDP (growth domestic product) had risen at an annual average of 4% since 1986 - a rate that is 1.5% above the EU average - as a consequence of investment and the "export boom". In 1995, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development commented (1995:99): "Driven both by exports and by a rebound in domestic demand, real GDP growth should reach around 2.5 per cent in 1995". At the end of decade, the ICEP (1999) stated, "the external commerce has contributed significantly to the economic development of Portugal, representing during the last decade between 55%-70% of the total GDP (55.2% in 1998)". According to the National Statistics Institute (NSI, 1999), over a period of just six years (1993 to 1998) Portuguese exports increased 60%, from US\$15,930 to US\$24,158 million (1999). More recently, Portugal has been looking to the export activity for short-term solutions, such as decreasing the nation's budget deficit within a short period.¹

Exploratory Findings

Export performance measurement

Interviews revealed that the interviewed managers are particularly concerned with short-term export performance. When assessing performance, managers place a high emphasis on short-term factors, and are particularly worried about setting annual targets and assessing annual export performance improvement. Although long-term export performance is crucial, if the exporting activities of the firm are unsuccessful in the short term it will be extremely difficult to focus on the future.

There is also a common practice of focusing on annual performance results because it is much easier to establish and quantify results annually than in the long term. Furthermore, managers consider short-term performance vital because it relates to their own personal interests. In recent years, there has been an increasing mobility of managers across firms, and top managers spend fewer years within any one organization. Moreover, performance improvement at the end of the year might have an immediate effect in terms of personal income (e.g. salary bonus). This might lead them to place more importance on short-term performance (see: Lages and Montgomery 2004; Lages and Jap, 2003; Lages and Lages, 2004).

Despite this consensus on the importance of short-term export performance assessment, it was not possible to find agreement across the various companies (and sometimes within the same company) in terms of the variables used to measure export performance. This is reflected in some of the responses obtained during the interviews: *"It depends on who you ask"* (President of company A), *"I am not sure, it is an issue that I would like to discuss with the other directors"* (exporting director of company G), and *"The market tells us which indicators to use"* (managing director of company D). The findings also revealed that many Portuguese managers were 'unable' to answer specific questions about financial performance. Profit and sales were the most common variables used to measure companies' export performance. As stated by a marketing director (company E), *"You need to look at the profit and sales"*. Other less common variables include: market share, turnover, cash return, sales growth, margins and return on investments. With regard to performance evaluation, many managers use their own perceptions of performance rather than objective values to formulate their decisions. This is confirmed, for example, by the statement of the director of a small wine exporter (company C): *"As we are a small company we cannot use our market share to measure performance among the various countries. We prefer to use qualitative measures such as quality levels"*. Other subjective evaluations used are customer satisfaction, delivery and customer service.

Impact of uncontrollable factors on export marketing strategy and export performance

Internal uncontrollable factors

With regard to size, some of the smaller companies argued that despite their size giving them some competitive disadvantages, it also provides them with the possibility of being more flexible. As stated by the general manager of a small clothing exporting firm (company S), *"We have a flexible structure that can be easily changed"*. The lack of resources or expertise in a certain area may also become determinants when developing a marketing strategy. As stated by a marketing director in company E, *"In the short term, the main objective for this company is to develop the marketing field. We know that it is possible to do much more with the rest of the world but we do not have enough time because of lack of people in this area."*

External uncontrollable factors

As different markets present different characteristics, the lack of information on these markets may bring disadvantages to a company. As stated by the export manager of a large paint firm (Company L), *"The little information we have of the different sectors in the overseas markets affects our strategy and negatively affects our export performance"*. Clear differences between markets are found when comparing the external factors faced by exporters to less developed countries (LDCs), with exporters to developed countries. For example, the sales manager of company X, when asked how the current strategy would affect his company's performance, answered: *"It depends more on the conditions of the market (i.e., Angola) than on our strategy"*. A similar opinion is shared by the managing director of a foodstuffs exporter (company H) that exports to the former Portuguese Overseas Territories in Africa (known as the PALOP - the Portuguese Speaking African Countries): *"Our company is very dependent on world economic factors, such as, problems with wars, credit lines provided to help the Less Developed Countries and stability of exchange rates."* Another industrial exporter (Company N) stated: *"The political instability and the lack of confidence make it extremely difficult to develop stronger relations with these countries"*. Even when comparing two developed European countries, key differences can be found. For example, according to a managing director of a wine company (Company A), *"The British market may be defined as a quality and mature market with a great deal of history. The French market is not as old, very large and consumes much lower quality products. The points of distribution, the perception of the product and, the consumers are very different"*.

The politico-legal issues are key aspects to take into consideration. As argued by the general manager of a non-metallic exporter company (company P), *"The existing lobbies that led to the recent legislation about amianthus, made our company completely change our strategy and look for alternative products."* These issues may also vary from industry to industry and from market to market. A marketing director (company E) said, *"Portugal and Britain have been trading partners for many years, and now they both are part of the EU. There are no differences concerning the promotional and product legislation in these countries. However, in America, for example, it is necessary to obtain legal approval for any label that will be used on our product"*.

The characteristics of the industry also play a major role. As stated by a marketing director (company E), *"We don't look to return on investment because in the Port wine industry, there are many products (e.g., a 40 Year Old Tawny) that are sold only after a few decades, and therefore is very difficult to look to ascertain the return on investment that was done many years ago"*. The level of competition at the industry level may be considered a key issue. As asserted by the general manager of company V, *"The performance of our company is dependent on the competition feedback"*. Similarly, the level of competition at the domestic level plays a major role. A managing director (company C) claimed: *"At the moment competition is increasing in the domestic market and the margins are decreasing. We do not want*

this to affect our margins, therefore we have been increasing our exports since 1993."

The relationship between controllable factors and export performance

Impact of marketing strategy on export performance

The findings revealed that despite the fact that the adaptation of a product strategy requires greater investment, managers are pressured to adapt their strategies to achieve better performance. The general manager of a clothing exporting firm (company S) stated: *"The competition made us adapt our products in the foreign market"*. In many exporting situations, the use of a standardized product could be a disaster in terms of performance. As an assistant director (company I) states, *"There is a need to adapt our cork-jackets to the various markets. For example, in Norway, that is our main market, yellow is out of the question"*. Another key issue that was raised and had not been identified in the literature is related to the importance of delivery deadlines. For example, the general manager of a medical exporter (company V) noted: *"The delivery deadlines are very important. The companies do not like to have stocks and they demand to receive the merchandise on time."*

Impact of preceding export performance on the degree of marketing program adaptation and management's perceptions

The impact of preceding performance on marketing strategy was raised and discussed by several managers at different levels. The general manager of a small medical exporting firm (company V) stated: *"It is on the basis of our company's performance that we define our strategy."* Similarly, the sales executive of a large rope-yarn exporting company (company J) stated: *"Our allocation budget is made in accordance to the preceding year's export performance"*. Other statements suggest that the preceding year's performance affects the current year performance through its influence on management's perceptions and the current year's strategy. A general manager (company S) stated: *"Last year we didn't have a very good year. This year we are trying to find a way to improve our performance. Recently, we did an analysis of our previous year's strategy, in terms of distribution, in order to identify ways in which we could improve these results"*.

Similarly, the exporting director of a Port wine company (Company G) indicated that the degree of adaptation of some marketing mix elements also influenced export performance. He stated: *"We are aware that Port wine is a traditional product and it is extremely dangerous to make any modification for our export markets. However, last year our company decided to adapt the packaging for one of our products. After these modifications our export sales for this product increased by 60%. This year we are thinking about changing the packaging, as well as the labeling"*.

Implications and Directions for Future Research in the Asia Pacific Region

Export performance measurement

Although some might argue that it is possible to measure export performance with a single variable (as suggested by the most recent literature) it is advisable for future

studies to use multi-dimensional scales that capture the complexity of export success based on a set of different variables (cf. Bijmolt and Zwart, 1994). My findings also reveal that managers appear to be short-term oriented when defining their strategies and when assessing the performance of an export venture (see also: Lages and Montgomery, 2001). Moreover, my findings also suggest that current export strategy is determined as a function of past export performance and that export performance levels tend to reinforce one another from one period to the next. This works in two ways. When the firm performs well, internal publics (e.g. employees, union representatives) and external publics (e.g. clients/customers, suppliers, investors, and credit institutions) are more likely to react favorably to the firm, thus facilitating continued performance improvement (Isen and Baron, 1991). On the other hand, poor performance may negatively influence performance in the next period, as the reputation of both the firm and top management are harmed by poor performance (Sutton and Callahan, 1987). The perception of failure on the part of the different entities interacting with the company, enhanced by the firm's internal instability, may lead the organization into vicious cycles of "unsuccess" (Masuch, 1985). Hence, future research in the Asia Pacific Region is strongly encouraged to further explore this issue because export managers "*truly are, and should be, concerned with their firms' past performance*" (Lages and Jap, 2003: 98).

Determinants of export performance

Both the size and resource levels appeared as key determinants of marketing strategy adaptation and export performance. My findings also revealed that companies are often pressured to adapt their strategies to foreign markets in order to achieve better performance. Moreover, this adaptation process is strongly influenced by domestic market characteristics, an issue typically neglected in the export marketing literature.

The most recent literature on the determinants of export performance, particularly after Cavusgil and Zou's (1994) contribution, is based on the contingency approach. The contingency perspective has been well accepted in organizational studies (McKee, Varadarajan and Pride, 1989) and marketing research (Zeithaml, Varadarajan and Zeithaml, 1988). Its defenders argue that this perspective provides the *right* way to deal with export performance determinants (see: Leonidou, Katsikeas and Samiee, 2002; Zou and Stan, 1998). However, this study has found that it is impossible to understand current export performance and successful adaptation without taking into consideration the perceptions of managers about the previous year's export performance. Hence, future research in the Asia Pacific Region is strongly encouraged to combine these new findings with the contingency approach.

The impact of past export performance

In order to advance export marketing theory in the Asia Pacific region, future research is strongly encouraged to better explore the effects of past export performance at different exporting levels. One possibility is to explore a conflicting rationale present in the strategy and organizational behavior literature. While this literature suggests the existence of vicious cycles of success and unsuccess, at the same time, it suggests that if performance improves, the opportunities to increase per-

formance may be viewed as discretionary possibilities. The firms may experience the “fat cat syndrome” (Dutton and Duncan, 1987, 290) which may be regarded as the adoption of much simpler marketing strategies involving less effort and consideration of environmental and internal forces. A good performance might promote more relaxed (Cyert and March, 1963) and effortless strategic decisions (Bourgeois, 1981; March and Simon, 1958; Litschert and Bonham, 1978) and a decline in adaptive behavior (Greve, 1998). These managers will become narrowly focused and overly preoccupied with the factors that have contributed to their firms’ good performance, so that they will tend to exploit the existing opportunities without previously searching for information and conducting an in-depth analysis of the environment (Cyert and March, 1963). Hence, firms performing better might lose their ability to react to the various contingent forces (Miller, 1993). The firm may begin to allocate its resources in a simpler way, reflecting a singular focus that does not correspond adequately to the complex environment that the firm is actually facing.

The organizational and strategy literature suggests that managers of firms performing poorly are under considerable pressure (Fredrickson, 1985). Poor performance puts pressure on managers to take comprehensive, accurate and discriminating decisions (Cyert and March, 1963). It is much more likely that these managers search widely for information and conduct an in-depth analysis of the surrounding environments (Audia, Locke and Smith, 2000). They are expected to do a better job, which naturally encourages them to develop more comprehensive and rational strategic decisions than managers with a better performance. However, when a firm is performing badly, the reputations of the exporting operations and export managers are worsened and, consequently, they will likely have fewer resources available. Nevertheless, one should also note some exceptions. For example, in certain situations firms might be prepared to accept consistent losses in order to learn and establish market share, and during this phase commitment might increase. In sum, based on this rationale, when researching export firms from the Asia Pacific Region one might question if past performance will lead to vicious cycles of success or, on another hand, will lead to less sophisticated marketing strategies and consequently to a worse performance.

Conclusion

Since export marketing is a research topic in a very early stage, it is strongly recommended to initially gather exploratory insights and then use them as a basis to support the development of more complex empirical models. Firms based in the Asia Pacific region might be used in order to further test some of my exploratory findings and the relationships presented in this research. Some possibilities for further advancement of export marketing theory in the Asia Pacific Region include the future analysis of the indirect relationships among variables presented in the different models, and the analysis of the impact of past export performance on both export marketing strategy and export performance. As the importance of relationships in an international business context increases, research is encouraged to study different types of relationships (e.g. exporter-importer, franchisor-franchisee) (see Lages, Lages and Lages, forthcoming). Finally, export marketing research in the Asia Pacific Region is recommended to pay more attention to the short-term effects and to short-term export performance assessment. Some interesting research

questions that may be raised for advancing export marketing theory in the Asia Pacific Region are: When the export operations of Asian firms are performing well, are managers more likely to use simpler or more complex strategies? And, when firms perform poorly, overall, which elements (e.g. in terms of export strategy and actions) are associated with past performance results? How important is the short-term dimension in the Asia Pacific region when compared to Europe and the USA?

Hopefully, this paper will encourage researchers to look at the export marketing literature from a different perspective. My findings reveal that the traditional export marketing approach (which ignores the effects of *past* performance, short-term performance, and focuses mostly on the *direct* determinants of export performance) is limited and might be significantly developed in the coming years.

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Biography

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Footnote

1. See for example "World Report: Portugal" in the *Financial Times*, Oct. 21, 2002:11.

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