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Innovation, export orientation, export assistance, and SMEs' export performance: a case in Vietnam's Mekong delta provinces

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of innovation capability on the relationships of export assistance, and export market orientation (EMO) on the export performance of SMEs. Based on the resource-based view (RBV), by incorporating the relationship marketing theory (RMT) and domestic and firm characteristics, this study proposes and validates a research model using convenience sampling (n = 318) and a face-to-face survey of SMEs exporting agricultural products in the Mekong Delta region, Vietnam. The SmartPLS4 package was utilised for data analysis. The research findings reveal that: 1) except export assistance, factors including export market orientation, commitment, trust, and innovation significantly affect export performance; 2) while innovation acts as a mediator of the relationship between export assistance-export performance, it does not mediate the link export market orientation-export performance. This study enriches the export literature by providing original insights into the key drivers of export success for SMEs and suggests theoretical and practical implications for emerging economies.

Keywords: export performance; innovation; relationship marketing; export market orientation; EMO; export assistance; small and medium-sized enterprises; SME; Vietnam.

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1 Introduction

Academics and policymakers have long been interested in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) due to their substantial contributions to the world's economic development. According to the World Bank (2022), SMEs constitute around 90% of all firms and account for over 50% of global employment and over 40% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in emerging economies. In Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, SMEs represent up to 99% of firms, account for over 60% of employment, and play a significant role in creating new and value-added jobs (OECD, 2023). For emerging economies, exporting is a way to participate in and benefit from internationalisation.

In Vietnam, the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) (MPI VN, 2023) reported that SMEs make up 98% of active firms and account for about 46% of the nation's GDP. SMEs contribute about 30% of the country's export value, which reached US$100 billion in 2020 (Chu, 2020). However, firms' (especially SMEs') export performance (EP) still falls short of the Vietnamese government's target (Chu, 2020).

Due to increasing globalisation and the expansion of international business, emerging economies are shifting their focus to exportation, which is seen as simpler and less resource intensive than other forms of international business, such as overseas manufacturing and joint ventures (Tesfom and Lutz, 2006; Arghashi and Okumuş, 2022). In globalisation, to gain a competitive advantage in both domestic and international markets, SME exporters must prioritise enhancing EP through export market orientation (EMO), which involves gathering, disseminating, and acting upon information on foreign markets and stakeholders (i.e., competitors, distributors, government bodies, customers) (Gupta and Chauhan, 2021; Malca et al., 2020). This is crucial due to the increased complexity, uncertainty, innovation-led change, and competitive pressure in international markets (Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci and İpek, 2020; İpek and Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2020).

Despite SMEs having a significant impact on emerging economies, there is a dearth of comprehensive studies on how to improve SMEs' EP (Safari et al., 2022; Leonidou et al., 2022). SMEs face numerous hindrances when entering foreign markets. These include such resource- and capability-related problems as:

1 strategic orientation in export

2 information, expertise, and legal knowledge in comparison to local enterprises

3 capability to innovate to boost export efficiency

4 establishing relations with entities and customers for export operations (Agndal and Chetty, 2007; İpek and Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2020; Hunt and Morgan, 1995; Ho et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2019; Hult et al., 2004).

Recently, Vietnam has issued policies to develop SMEs. Law No. 04/2017/QH14 supports SMEs. Resolution No. 19/2018/NQ-CP improves the business environment, develops the private economy, and enhances national competitiveness. Decree No. 38/2018/ND-CP regulates investments in start-up SMEs and innovation (INN). These policies aim to support SMEs in exploiting bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) to seize international business opportunities, specifically in exportation.

Researchers claim that government support (Faroque et al., 2021; Mostafiz et al., 2021) and their capability to innovate (Tran et al., 2023; Edeh et al., 2020; Expósito and Sanchis-Llopis, 2019) and conduct relationship marketing (RM) activities in foreign markets (Genc et al., 2020; Hasaballah et al., 2019; Payne and Frow, 2017) are major bottlenecks in the export activities of SMEs in developing countries. However, too few studies on the effects of important factors such as government support, RM activities, and innovation capabilities on the EP of SMEs in emerging economies have been conducted to convincingly establish the veracity of those conclusions (Mostafiz et al., 2021; Njegić et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2014). Although some studies address three dyadic links between INN-EP, EA-EP, and EMO-EP, there is no empirical evidence of the triangular relationship between EA-EMO-INN and EP (Mostafiz et al., 2021; Zhang and Zhu, 2016). Moreover, the forgotten mediating role of firms' innovation capability in the relationships of EA and EMO on EP must be explored (Ortigueira-Sánchez et al., 2022; Bodlaj and Čater, 2022). According to our intensive, up-to-date review, no empirical studies have been conducted on those factors' effects on EP (Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci and İpek, 2020; Chen et al., 2016; Paul et al., 2017).

Research on Vietnam's export activities is sparse and mainly examines a few factors, including financial support (Archer et al., 2020; Ngo, 2023; Chen et al., 2016; Tran et al., 2023). Moreover, despite the Mekong Delta's status as a crucial economic corridor in Southwestern Vietnam, the region's export endeavours have been entirely ignored. This region, known for having the lowest income in the country, needs substantial government assistance (Chu, 2020; Fulbright, 2020). The region, comprising the 13 provinces of Long An, Tien Giang, Ben Tre, Vinh Long, Tra Vinh, Can Tho, Soc Trang, Bac Lieu, Ca Mau, Kien Giang, An Giang, Dong Thap, and Hau Giang, possesses abundant resources and a tropical climate favourable to agriculture. If it is going to actively engage in exporting, the region will need to effectively utilise its advantages (Fulbright, 2020). This study examines:

1 the impact of export assistance (EA) and RM on the EP of export-oriented SMEs in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region

2 firm innovation capability's mediating role in the relationships between those factors and EP.

To achieve the two research objectives, this study employs:

1 the resource-based view (RBV) (Barney, 1991) and dynamic capability theory (DCT) (Teece et al., 1997), which advocate that firms should nurture, build, and reconfigure valuable resources (tangible and intangible), competencies, and capabilities to secure competitive advantages in the marketplace (Lin and Wu, 2014; Gregory et al., 2019; Mostafiz et al., 2021)

2 relationship marketing theory (RMT) (Morgan and Hunt, 1995), which has been widely employed to explain why and how firms maintain long-term relationships with stakeholders and by extension their competitive edge (Hasaballah et al., 2019; Paul et al., 2017). RMT focuses on the intangible resources of commitment (COM) and trust (TR). It examines how firms trade products and services and create value for their customers.

This study makes multiple contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence that government support, RM activities, and innovation capabilities affect SMEs' EP

(Chen et al., 2016). It demonstrates that INN plays two roles in SMEs' EP. INN is a critical determinant of EP and a significant mediator between such factors as EA and EP. Second, the study establishes that EA significantly affects EP but that firms need complementary capabilities to maximise their benefits from EA. EA affects EP indirectly, and its effects depend on firms' innovation capability or EMO. Third, this study contributes to research on RM by proving that cultivating TR and COM with a host of stakeholders helps firms maintain long-term relationships for export activities. Since export-oriented SMEs operate in complex international markets, strong, mutually reassuring relationships with relevant parties help maintain firms' competitive advantages. Fourth, the study is one of the first to investigate SMEs' export activities in an under-resourced agricultural economic region in a developing country (i.e., the Mekong Delta). Exporters and policymakers in economies like Vietnam's can benefit from this study's empirical findings.

2 Theoretical backgrounds and research hypotheses development

2.1 Resource-based view

The RBV has been widely utilised to elucidate firms' competitiveness and performance. The RBV posits that cultivating valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources is key to business viability and economic rents (Lin and Wu, 2014; Ngo and O'Cass, 2012b). More specifically, researchers have claimed that VRIN resources are associated with firms' competitive advantages and business performance (Gregory et al., 2019; Newbert, 2007; Ribau et al., 2017).

Strategic marketing researchers have investigated whether resources, capabilities, and competencies collectively contribute to firms' achieving better business performance (Ngo and O'Cass, 2012a; Newbert, 2007; Teece et al., 1997; Wernerfelt, 1984). The process of accumulating VRIN resources and transforming them into capabilities to secure competitive advantages has become a focal point in the export strategic marketing literature (Eloranta and Turunen, 2015; Lin and Wu, 2014). Similarly, RBV researchers have observed how resources, capabilities, and orientation collectively affect firm performance (Morgan et al., 2009; Menguc and Auh, 2008; Ngo and O'Cass, 2012b). Vorhies et al. (2009) argued that competently deploying resources contributes more to a firm's sustaining its performance than possessing resources on their own. Researchers have employed the RBV to assess how SMEs' characteristics and capabilities (e.g., INN, market export strategy) affect their performance (Oura et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2019). However, in the competitive international business environment, SMEs have increasingly employed RM practices to succeed in global markets (Morgan and Hunt, 1995; Chen et al., 2016).

2.2 Relationship marketing theory

Firms commonly use RM to manage multistakeholder exchange relationships and as a value-in-exchange-focused marketing strategy (Payne and Frow, 2017). Morgan and Hunt (1995) defined RM as "all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (p.22). RM theorists focus on how firms conduct their marketing activities to create and maintain successful

exchanges with their partners, including customers, suppliers, governmental agencies, and even competitors (Ahearne et al., 2022; Dwyer et al., 1987).

Due to their insufficient tangible resources, SMEs rely on intangible resources (e.g., relational capabilities and relationships), trade services and products, and create value for their customers to maintain competitive advantages and develop connections with other stakeholders (Pinho, 2016). Additionally, due to shifting orientation to developing foreign markets, researchers and export marketers have argued that, in addition to traditional resources and capabilities, relationships and relational practices significantly inform EMO and by extension shape EP (Lin et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2022). Firms' primary means to secure their market share is to maintain and expand their customer base, and doing so is vital to the success of export firms. RM has been regarded as an efficient approach to cultivating enduring and ongoing relationships with customers (Hasaballah et al., 2019; Styles et al., 2008; Ritter and Andersen, 2014). According to Hasaballah et al. (2019), RMT variables (e.g., commitment) have been thought to influence firm EP.

Researchers have used RMT to investigate firm performance (Navarro-García et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2016). They have demonstrated that relational exchange variables are determinants of export firm performance and regard RMT factors as critical to exporters' accomplishments (Leonidou et al., 2014; Paul, 2020). Researchers contend that there is a need for an integrative view of relational marketing's effects on relationships among firms that enter foreign markets (Paul, 2020). The proposed model encompasses four important types of relationships in which export firms participate: political (e.g., with local governmental agencies), business (e.g., with foreign businesses and local distributors), social (e.g., with local cultures), and internal (e.g., with local staffs) (Paul, 2020; Elg et al., 2017; Brenes et al., 2014).

2.3 Proposed hypotheses and model

2.3.1 EMO and export performance

Market orientation

Market orientation (MO) is broadly defined as the firm-level generation of, dissemination of, and response to market intelligence on relevant stakeholders (e.g., customers) and market environments (e.g., policies, culture) (Ngo and O'Cass, 2012b; Song et al., 2015; Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci and İpek, 2020; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). MO has been characterised by Shapiro (1988) as a basis for making strategic and tactical decisions in a coordinated manner to bring superior value to customers; by Kohli and Jaworski (1990) as a set of specific, ongoing activities; and by Randhawa et al. (2021) as the allocation of resources and effort to meet customers' preferences in current markets and proactively adapt to new markets. Organisational behaviour researchers maintain that MO affects organisational culture and, when combined with learning orientation, enhances firm performance (Slater and Narver, 1995) and secures competitive advantages (Day, 1994; Low et al., 2007). MO has been defined not only as a firm's philosophy for conducting business, rooted in its values and manifested in its strategic business plan, but also as customer-driven coordinated practices (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Mahmoud et al., 2020). Acting on an MO involves identifying unfulfilled customer needs, directing the firm's capabilities towards meeting those needs, and subsequently soliciting customer feedback to assess the attractiveness of the firm's new offerings. MOs guide how firms

observe dynamic market demands, assess customer satisfaction against these changes, accelerate product and service innovation, and implement plans to enhance their competitive advantages (Gupta and Chauhan, 2021).

Export market orientation

Unlike firms that engage in domestic business, export-oriented firms targeting foreign markets have an EMO. Researchers define EMO practices as those that contribute to the export-led generation of, dissemination of, and responsiveness to export market intelligence (Cadogan et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2014). Export market-oriented businesses' performance differs from that of domestic market-oriented firms, primarily due to the varying resource allocation requirements in the international business environment (Cadogan et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2014). Pascucci et al. (2016) described EMO as a combination of three components – export market intelligence generation, dissemination, and responsiveness – and described two approaches to understanding the relationship between EMO and EP. The first observes firms' EMOs as an aggregation of the three components, and the second considers the relationships between individual EMO components and EP separately (Dong et al., 2016; Pascucci et al., 2016).

This study defines EMO as the processes via which a firm gathers intelligence about customers and relevant stakeholders in foreign markets, disseminates the information across functional departments, and acts to fill needs in its export markets. Practising an EMO requires that export firms constantly monitor their customers, competitors, and market environments in order to develop and offer goods and services that their customers perceive as valuable. Research on SMEs' EMOs, especially in developing economies, is limited and its results have been more contradictory than those of the research on firms' export activities amid globalisation (Paul, 2020; Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci and İpek, 2020; Gupta et al., 2019). Furthermore, while export market–oriented firms place the highest priority on tracking foreign markets and customers to create maximum customer value, research on the relationship between EMO and EP is still in its infancy (Paul, 2020).

Export performance

Researchers have used EP as a central variable in studying international business (Leonidou et al., 2014). Given the rapid growth of the international business literature, definitions and measurements of EP vary widely (Shoham, 2021). EP has been conceptualised as a firm's overall export effectiveness, efficiency, and engagement (Shoham, 2021). According to Katsikeas et al. (2000), there are various ways to measure EP. For instance, EP can be measured in terms of export effectiveness, efficiency, and adaptiveness or using economic and non-economic measures (Oliveira et al., 2012).

Marketing and export researchers differ in how they define and utilise the concept of EP (see e.g., Gupta and Chauhan, 2021; Njegić et al., 2020; Sousa, 2004; Sharma et al., 2020). The scholarly consensus is that EP is a multifaceted variable and that using it in research requires appropriate, clearly defined measurements (Njegić et al., 2020; Sousa and Bradley, 2009). Researchers generally measure EP in terms of export sales, profits, and changes. Changes is a benchmarked performance dimension "assessed through subjective, satisfaction-based measures" (Shoham, 2021). Some recent studies measured EP through financial and strategic performance (e.g., Papadopoulos and Martín Martín,

2010), but others employed profitability and sales growth (Shoham, 2021) and market share (Sharma et al., 2020).

When using EP, researchers need to decide whether to use subjective or objective measurements, or both, and determine the unit of analysis or the level at which to examine EP. The choice of subjective or objective measurements should be informed by the fact that respondents can use the former to emphasise firms' successes and are hesitant to provide the specific financial and market information required by the latter (Njegić et al., 2020; Pascucci et al., 2016).

Most researchers advocate examining EP at the export venture level because doing so more accurately identifies and isolates contextually appropriate antecedents of EP (Oliveira et al., 2012; Sousa and Bradley, 2009). Oliveira et al. (2012) stated that researchers investigating the causes of variance in individual export ventures' performance should examine EP at an export venture level. Doing so allows researchers to determine how successful a firm is within their studies' settings. Understanding what factors are influencing an export venture's performance helps export firms maintain ventures' competitive advantages (Oliveira et al., 2012; Lages et al., 2009; Bodlaj and Čater, 2022).

Empirical studies have investigated the link between EMO and EP in various contexts, including both developed and emerging economies. However, these studies' findings have been mixed (Mostafiz et al., 2021; Racela et al., 2007).

Based on the aforementioned theoretical work and empirical research, we hypothesise:

H1 EMO is positively correlated with EP.

2.3.2 Innovation (INN)

Innovation (INN) has been regarded as a key to firms developing competitive advantages and growing (Teece, 2007; Guan and Ma, 2003; Filipescu et al., 2013). The OECD's (2005) Oslo Manual introduced four different types of INN: product innovation, process innovation, marketing innovation, and organisational innovation. Drawn on RBV, recent study focused on the significance of firms' innovation-related resource and capability (Zhang and Zhu, 2016; Ortigueira-Sánchez et al., 2022), acquiring unique technological and managerial knowledge, engaging in research and development, and improving technologies for their export and international commercial activities (Filipescu et al., 2013).

Studies on the link between INN and firm performance have traditionally concentrated on new technologies, new product development, and R&D activities (see e.g., Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci and İpek, 2020). However, INN can also occur in marketing and organisation, and high EP requires a combination of multiple competencies (Gupta and Chauhan, 2021; Oura et al., 2016). To access foreign markets, firms might restructure their organisations, redeploy their resources, or develop new competencies, technologies, and processes (Farzaneh et al., 2022; Edeh et al., 2020). Innovating in management and production helps firms to provide products in accordance with their strategies for foreign markets (Ribau et al., 2017; Terziovski, 2010).

Drawing on Gunday et al. (2011) and Oura et al.'s (2016) work, this study focuses on INN in organisation, marketing, procedures and processes, and information technology. Each category includes distinct competencies, skills, and knowledge that shape firms'

routines and practices so as to optimise resource utilisation and maintain superior performance (Gunday et al., 2011; Teece, 2007).

Despite the growing body of research on the links between firms' innovation capabilities, EMOs, and performance, empirical data remain limited, and what data are available point to contradictory conclusions (Oura et al., 2016; Ribau et al., 2017; Atuahene-Gima, 1996; Grinstein, 2008; Lin et al., 2014). Various studies have investigated the links between SMEs' INN, EMO, and EP (see, e.g., Acosta et al., 2018; Donbesuur et al., 2020; Edeh et al., 2020). Most of the studies have found positive correlations between the three factors and that INN is a mediator between EMO and EP (Kazemi et al., 2023; Low et al., 2007). However, a few studies have found no correlation between INN and EP (De Toni et al., 2022; Celec et al., 2014) and a positive link between INN and EMO (Ribau et al., 2017). Following the more common results, we hypothesise that:

H2 INN is positively correlated with EP.

H10 EMO is positively correlated with INN.

2.3.3 Commitment (COM) and trust (TR)

Researchers have claimed that firm reciprocity is central to RM and a key factor in its effectiveness in the marketplace (Morgan and Hunt, 1995; Möller and Halinen, 2000). Globalisation and heightened competitiveness on international markets have altered the dynamics of buyer-seller interactions (Genc et al., 2020). Export firms tend to deepen their bonds with their stakeholders in order to succeed in their export activities (Suseno and Rowley, 2018).

Researchers have studied how RM affects various aspects of firms' EP (see e.g., Paul, 2020). Researchers and marketers have examined how such RMT variables as adaptation, communication, cooperation, trust (TR), and COM affect the quality of firms' relationships (see Mahmoud et al., 2020; Hasaballah et al., 2019). They have identified TR and COM as potential influences on relationships and EP (Hasaballah et al., 2019; Genc et al., 2020; Leonidou et al., 2014). Several studies have investigated COM's impact on EP and EMO (see e.g., Lin et al., 2014).

Commitment (COM) has been defined as the belief that maintaining ongoing relationships with partners is vital and merits the expenditure of considerable effort. Committed parties believe that relationships are worth investing in to ensure they last (Payne and Frow, 2017; Hasaballah et al., 2019). COM is vital to developing inter-firm relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1995). This study defines COM as an enduring desire to maintain valued relationships with stakeholders and dedicate sufficient resources to export activities (Morgan and Hunt, 1995; Styles et al., 2008; Sichtmann and Von Selasinsky, 2010).

TR has been defined as a party's confidence in their partner's reliability and integrity (Morgan and Hunt, 1995). TR also involves the belief that exchanging resources based on mutual recognition would not harm either side. In a trusting relationship, both parties believe the other to be committed to resolving any issue through effective communication and following the principles of reciprocity and fair treatment (Langerak, 2001). TR is vital for firms, especially SMEs with inadequate resources, and has been found to be the central factor in successful business relationships (Johanson and Vahlne, 2015). TR can be seen as a relationship's governance mechanism (e.g., formal contract) (Vo et al.,

2023). However, TR cannot replace a written agreement (e.g., export contract), which provides additional functions beyond legal responsibilities (Cavusgil et al., 2004). Reduced ambiguity about partners' behaviours encourages firms to take greater risks and thus improve their EP (De Sousa et al., 2020).

Export researchers have called for further research on how EMOs mediate TR's and COM's relationships with EP (Lin et al., 2014). The causal connections between export firms' relationships, EMOs, and EP are the subject of ongoing debate in the export literature (Sousa and Bradley, 2009; Ghag et al., 2022). Long-term relationships have been considered more vital for SMEs because of their limited tangible resources and reliance on intangible ones in highly competitive business environments (Paul et al., 2017). SMEs employ various RM strategies, such as brand-related practices and inter-relationship building, to help their international trades (Ribau et al., 2017). While interorganisational connections facilitate the acquisition of market knowledge and contribute to consumer value creation (Kohli et al., 1993; Hasaballah et al., 2019), managers' relationships serve as a foundation for improving firm resources and confirming the quality and authenticity of marketplace information (Lin et al., 2014).

The extant literature contains conflicting results on whether interorganisational relationships affect EMO or vice versa (İpek and Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2020). Those contradictory findings suggest that the relationship variables and MOs are mutually dependent and bidirectional. On the one hand, MO helps SMEs enhance their long-term customer relationships and interorganisational relations through COM and TR in their partners on the international market. On the other hand, RM practices help export firms develop MOs for the competitive export business (İpek and Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2020; Kohli et al., 1993). Regardless of causal direction, given the observed connections between EMO and relationship variables, we hypothesise:

H3 TR is positively correlated with EP.

H4 COM is positively correlated with EP.

H7 TR is positively correlated with EMO.

H8 COM is positively correlated with EMO.

2.3.4 Export assistance (EA)

EA is defined as support government agencies or government-established associations provide to firms to boost and accelerate their export activities (Lages and Montgomery, 2005; Leonidou et al., 2014). EA can enhance firms' EP by providing information on potential export markets, supplying affordable credits, and facilitating knowledge transfer from other markets and consumers to enable firms to target foreign customers' demands (Czinkota, 1994; Sousa and Bradley, 2009). This paper investigates how much support firms receive from national and provincial government agencies, professional associations, and international trade bodies.

Export firms are highly dependent on EA because they, especially those from emerging economies, face many difficulties, such as limited resources (e.g., financial, human) and lack of knowledge and experience on foreign business settings (Mostafiz et al., 2021; Singh and Gautam, 2022; Leonidou et al., 2015). EA initiatives enhance domestic firms' export competitiveness and assist them in overcoming barriers to exporting (Njegić et al., 2020). Researchers, policymakers, and managers acknowledge

that there is a need for specific approaches to EA programmes (e.g., finance, policy, trainings) at multiple levels (e.g., national, provincial, association) and for specific areas (e.g., technology, information) (Faroque et al., 2021; Mostafiz et al., 2021).

Although EA benefits entrepreneurial and incumbent firms (Sousa and Bradley, 2009), research on its impact on EP is rare and almost non-existent for SMEs and emerging economies. Moreover, the results of what little research is available are fragmented and inconsistent (Chen et al., 2016; Njegić et al., 2020). Since the RBV suggests that firms utilise EA to tackle internal resource shortages, we expect EA to positively affect EP. Furthermore, the researchers suggest investigating the relationship between EA and EP with appropriate sets of indicators and considering intermediate variables such as firm resources and strategy (Mostafiz et al., 2021; Njegić et al., 2020). We hypothesise that:

H5 EA is positively correlated with EP.

H6 EA is positively correlated with INN.

H9 EA is positively correlated with EMO.

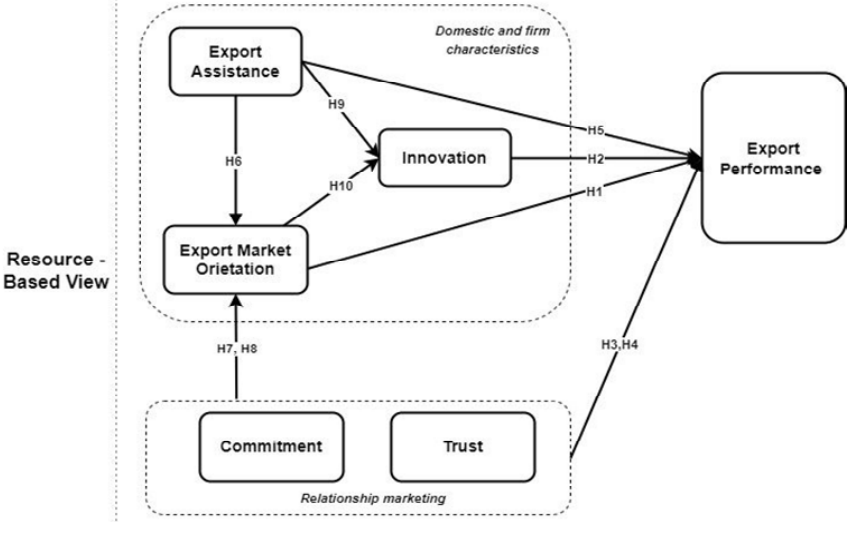
H11 INN mediates the relationship between EP and EP.

H12 INN mediates the relationship between EMO and EP.

2.3.5 Research model

Based on our hypotheses, we propose the following research model in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Research model



Source: Authors' elaboration

3 Research methodology

3.1 Data collection and sample

This study investigated the activities of SMEs exporting agricultural products in six provinces (Ben Tre, Long An, Can Tho, Tien Giang, Dong Thap, and Kien Giang). We randomly selected these provinces from 13 Mekong Delta provinces. Accordingly, selected provinces with export activities are distributed from the target region's highest (i.e., Long An) to lowest (Kien Giang) ranks (Nhung, 2023). The provinces reportedly represented different socioeconomic diversity, particularly the agricultural export sector of the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam (World Population Review, 2022). No research exists on the export activities of this region's SMEs (Pham et al., 2017; Archer et al., 2020; Fulbright, 2020). SMEs in the agriculture sector are categorised as micro, small, or medium-size. Decree No. 39/2018/ND-CP requires these firms to have less than US$800,000 in total capital or fewer than 200 employees.

Table 1 The participants' demographic profile

Factor		*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Province	Ben Tre	76	23.9
	Long An	53	16.7
	Can Tho	82	25.8
	Tien Giang	44	13.8
	Dong Thap	31	9.7
	Kien Giang	32	10.1
Export products	Rice	88	23.1
	Coconut and its processed goods	74	19.4
	Fresh fruits (e.g., grapefruit, durian, mango)	81	21.3
	Seafood (e.g., shrimp, clams)	96	25.2
	Other products	42	11.0
Targeting export market	ASEAN*	124	26.6
	China	189	40.5
	Japan, Korea and others Asian countries	37	7.9
	EU**	62	13.3
	North America	55	11.8
Number of employees	Less than 10	26	8.2
	From 11 to 99	132	41.5
	From 100 to less than 200	160	50.3

Notes: Legend. (*) association of Southeast Asian Nations; (**) European Union.

Source: Authors' calculation

We surveyed 500 firms' chief executive officers, export marketing managers, and senior managers involved in exporting operations. Before data collection, a pre-test was conducted (n = 20) with export experts, exporters, and international business lecturers to evaluate the understandability of the questionnaire and thereby ensure its validity (Colton and Covert, 2015; Ha et al., 2022). We administered the questionnaire both face to face

and online. Before administering the questionnaire, we explained the consent statement and the study to the respondents. We assured respondents that we would only use their answers for research purposes and would keep them confidential. Our questionnaire first asked respondents about their demographic characteristics, location, export products, export market, and number of employees. We then calculated statistics on the INN, organisational relationships, MO, and EP of the respondents' firms.

We acquired potential respondents' contact information primarily from provincial agriculture, industry and commerce, and customs departments and from the association of SMEs. We also collected contact information from such sources as personal acquaintances because departmental and association databases are not consistently updated nor publicly available. Respondents who were available for scheduled appointments provided face-to-face interviews. Respondents who were willing to answer questions provided online interviews.

Of the 500 invited respondents, 318 completed the questionnaire, which accounted for 63.6%, and none of the items contained missing data, from July to December 2023. The study's sample size exceeds the requirement for partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) that a sample size be at least ten times the maximum number of structural routes directed towards a given latent component in the model (Hair et al., 2019; Nguyen and Dao, 2024). As shown in Figure 1, our research model consists of five paths: from EA, EMO, COM, TR, and INN to the dependent variable of EP. Consequently, our study required a minimum of fifty samples.

We used PLS-SEM (Sarstedt et al., 2022) and Smart PLS4 to analyse the data.

3.2 Sample characteristics

Of the six selected Mekong Delta provinces, Can Tho had the most respondents: 82 managers and executives, approximately 25.8% of the sample size. Ben Tre had the second-highest number of respondents: 76 (23.9%). Dong Thap had the smallest number of respondents: 31 (9.7%). Thirty-two respondents (10.1%) came from Kien Giang.

Seafood was the primary export product of 25.2% of the SMEs whose employees completed our questionnaire. Second, rice was of 23.1% of the SMEs. Next, fresh fruit was 21.3%. Coconut and coconut-based items were of 19.4% of the SMEs. Forty-two SMEs (11.0%) exported other agriculture products (e.g., crocodile leather, cashews).

Forty per cent of Mekong Delta SMEs' exports went to the Chinese market. Export markets are 27% the size of the market in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Over 10% of the SMEs in the study exported to Europe, and roughly the same percentage exported to the United States. Most SMEs export more than one product and ship to more than one foreign market. Half of the SMEs had between 100 and 200 workers, while 42% had 100 workers or fewer.

3.3 Measurement scale

This study employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) because of its precision and simplicity in assessing respondents' views (Nunnally, 1978). We collected and modified measurements from previous studies to guarantee the validity. We assessed all of the constructs to ensure that they accurately captured a firm's overall export function (Oliveira et al., 2012; Acikdilli et al., 2022). We assessed EA, COM, TR, and INN subjectively and EP objectively using carefully

selected scales from among those commonly used in research on similar contexts to that of our study (Trochim et al., 2016).

We adapted items from previous studies for our questionnaire. We modified four items from He et al.'s (2016) and Malca et al.'s (2021) studies to measure EP. We adopted six items from Ellis's (2005) and Gregory et al.'s (2019) to measure EMO. Also, we adapted measurements from Ellis's (2005) and Gregory et al.'s (2019) studies to measure EA. We adapted four items from Sichtmann and Von Selasinsky's (2010) and Leonidou et al.'s (2002) studies to measure COM. We adapted scales from Leonidou et al.'s (2002) and Hasaballah et al.'s (2019) studies to measure TR. We modified scales from Gunday et al.'s (2011) and Chiu et al.'s (2019) study to measure INN. Measurement items are in the appendix.

4 Results

4.1 Common method bias

Behavioural researchers widely acknowledge common method bias (CMB) as a genuine risk, especially when using single-informant surveys. To prevent CMB, we took numerous steps before collecting data. For example, we informed participants that their responses would remain anonymous and that there were no right or wrong answers (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The greatest variance inflation factor (VIF) figures indicate that our measurement model was free from CMB. The VIF values ranged from 1.554 (TR4) to 3.175 (EMO3) and were all less than 3.3. Moreover, all of the inner VIF results were less than 5.00. The indicated critical benchmark (Hair et al., 2019; Ha et al., 2023) showed no multicollinear correlation between the variables. CMB did not affect our research.

4.2 Assessment of the outer model

We evaluated the measurement models' reliability and convergent and discriminant validity. We verified item reliability by analysing the outer loadings with their associated latent variable using PLS-SEM. The standardised indicator loadings should be higher than 0.708 (Hair et al., 2019). As shown in Table 2, all of the research model's factor loadings, except EA4 (0.691), satisfied this criterion. Chin et al. (1997) and Hair et al. (2009) suggested that the standardised factor loading of all the item ranges were above the threshold limit of 0.6. We therefore retained the variable EA4 and considered the item reliability validated.

Convergent validity is the condition of an item being related to the construct it represents (Hair et al., 2019). A construct is convergently valid if its composite reliability (rho_c) is more than 0.70 (Henseler and Sarstedt, 2013) and its AVE is greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019). Table 2 shows that our constructs satisfy these criteria.

Academics use the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) to evaluate discriminant validity. HTMT values should be below 0.85 (Kline, 2015; Henseler et al., 2016). Since all of our research model's constructs had HTMT values less than 0.85 (Table 3), they are reliable and valid.

Table 2 Constructs and corresponding measures

Constructs	*Items*	*Loading*	*Cronbach's alpha*	*Composite reliability (rho_a)*	*Composite reliability (rho_c)*	*Average variance extracted (AVE)*
Export performance (EP)	EP1	0.896	0.918	0.920	0.942	0.803
	EP2	0.882				
	EP3	0.890				
	EP4	0.916				
Export assistance (EA)	EA1	0.715	0.792	0.801	0.856	0.545
	EA 2	0.775				
	EA 3	0.799				
	EA4	0.691				
	EA5	0.702				
Export market oriented (EMO)	EMO1	0.854	0.914	0.914	0.933	0.700
	EMO2	0.847				
	EMO3	0.860				
	EMO4	0.872				
	EMO5	0.807				
	EMO6	0.774				
Commitment (COM)	COM1	0.805	0.838	0.838	0.892	0.673
	COM2	0.803				
	COM3	0.840				
	COM4	0.833				
Trust (TR)	TR1	0.792	0.840	0.853	0.892	0.674
	TR2	0.849				
	TR3	0.848				
	TR4	0.793				
Innovation (IN)	INN1	0.823	0.880	0.880	0.913	0.676
	INN2	0.854				
	INN3	0.826				
	INN4	0.779				
	INN5	0.829				

Notes: Legend. COM = commitment; EA = export assistance; EMO = export market orientation; EP = export performance; INN = innovation; and TR = trust.

Source: Authors' calculation

4.3 Assessment of the inner model

We tested the research hypotheses using PLS-SEM and conducted path analysis using SmartPLS 4 software. Table 4 contains such statistics as the coefficient of determination (R-squared; R^2), t-statistics, and p-value. We determined the significance of path coefficients that support the hypotheses. Similar to Table 4, Figure 2 depicts the path coefficients and R^2 for all of the variables.

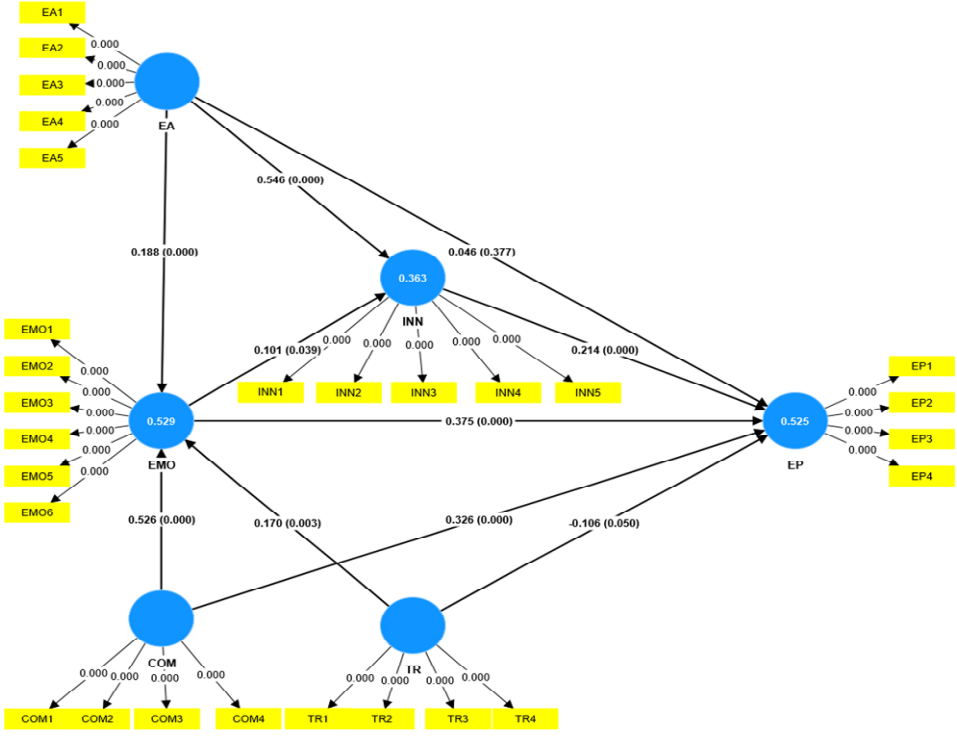
Table 3 HTMT results

	COM	*EA*	*EMO*	*EP*	*INN*	*TR*
COM						
EA	0.493					
EMO	0.774	0.548				
EP	0.706	0.501	0.705			
INN	0.353	0.718	0.410	0.481		
TR	0.481	0.559	0.529	0.350	0.495	

Notes: Legend. COM = commitment; EA = export assistance; EMO = export market orientation; EP = export performance; INN = innovation; and TR = trust.

Source: SmartPLS results

Figure 2 SmartPLS results (see online version for colours)



Source: SmartPLS results

Four direct relationships' p-values fall between 0.000 and 0.050, supporting H1 to H4. EMO, INN, TR, and COM positively influence SMEs' EP. The data do not support H5 (p-value = 0.377). We cannot conclude that EA affects EP. The data do support H6 (β = 0.546, p-value = 0.000) and H10 (β = 0.101, p-value = 0.039). EA and EMO positively influence innovation. The data also support H7 (β = 0.170, p-value = 0.003), H8 (β = 0.526, p-value = 0.000), and H9 (β = 0.188, p-value = 0.000). TR, COM, and EA affect EMO.

Table 4 Bootstrapping results

H	*Path*	*Path coefficient*	*Observed t-statistics*	*Standard deviation*	*Effect size (f2)*	*Bias*	*Confidence intervals (2.5%)*	*Confidence intervals (97.5%)*	*P-value*	*Results*
H1	EMO → EP	0.375	5.146	0.073	0.139	0.001	0.223	0.511	0.000	Supported
H2	INN → EP	0.214	3.730	0.057	0.059	–0.001	0.104	0.329	0.000	Supported
H3	TR → EP	–0.106	1.961	0.054	0.016	0.000	–0.211	0.001	0.050	Supported
H4	COM → EP	0.326	5.609	0.058	0.117	–0.001	0.213	0.441	0.000	Supported
H5	EA → EP	0.046	0.884	0.052	0.002	0.001	–0.059	0.149	0.377	Not supported
H6	EA → INN	0.546	10.355	0.053	0.355	0.003	0.43	0.637	0.000	Supported
H7	TR → EMO	0.170	2.982	0.057	0.045	0.002	0.062	0.282	0.003	Supported
H8	COM → EMO	0.526	10.539	0.050	0.443	0.000	0.425	0.62	0.000	Supported
H9	EA → EMO	0.188	4.113	0.046	0.054	0.000	0.093	0.276	0.000	Supported
H10	EMO → INN	0.101	2.068	0.049	0.012	–0.001	0.006	0.196	0.039	Supported
H11	EA → INN → EP	0.117	1.742	0.034					0.001	Supported
H12	EMO → INN → EP	0.022	1.742	0.012					0.082	Not supported

Notes: Legend. COM = commitment; EA = export assistance; EMO = export market orientation; EP = export performance; INN = innovation; and TR = trust.

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 5 R-squared results

	R-square	*R-square adjusted*
EMO	0.529	0.525
EP	0.525	0.517
INN	0.363	0.359

Notes: Legend. EMO = export market orientation; EP = export performance; INN = innovation.

Source: SmartPLS results

R^2 represents the number of predictors that may be used to explain variance in dependent variables (Hair et al., 2019). All R^2 values are listed in Table 5. The moderated R^2 values indicate that EMO, INN, TR, and COM together explained 52.5% of the total variance in EP ($R^2 = 0.525$), 52.9% of the variance in EMO ($R^2 = 0.529$), and 36.3% of the variance in INN. These results indicate that the structural model has an acceptable level of predictive accuracy.

4.4 Mediating effect of innovation

Our SmartPLS report supports H11 ($\beta = 0.117$, p-value = 0.001) (Figure 2). Since the results do not support the hypothesis that there is a direct relationship between EA and EP, innovation is a full mediator of the link between EA and EP. Contrastingly, although we confirmed a direct association between EMO and EP and found no statistical evidence for an indirect relationship between EMO and EP; innovation did not mediate the link. The results do not support H12 (p-value = 0.082).

5 Discussion and implications

5.1 Discussion

We used the RBV and RMT to investigate two research problems. We analysed how EA and RM affect Vietnamese SMEs' EP. We also examined how firm innovation influences EA's and RMO's links with EP.

The study's findings indicate that INN has a positive effect on EP (H2). Similarly, Ngo (2023) concluded that entrepreneurially oriented firms can gain advantages over their competitors and improve their EP by being innovative.

Our findings are consistent with those of previous studies: there is a positive predictive relationship between INN and EP (De Toni et al., 2022; Oura et al., 2016; Ngo and O'Cass, 2012a). Additionally, our findings show that EMO has significant positive relationships with both EP (H1) and INN (H10). Export-oriented SMEs' marketing strategies should aim to implement new technologies, products, and management and operation processes in order to fulfil customer expectations and demands and build and sustain competitive market shares in foreign markets.

Export market-oriented firms are innovative, and EMO facilitates improving EP (Migdadi et al., 2017). While our findings differ from the data analysis results of a few previous works (e.g., Aldas-Manzano et al., 2005), they are consistent with the findings

of the majority of studies on EMO and EP, including Low et al.'s (2007), De Toni et al.'s (2022), Kazemi et al.'s (2023) studies.

We found that EA positively affects INN (H9). Few studies have explored the relationship between EA and INN. Government support programmes for SMEs incentivise INN because governments see it as key to securing competitive advantages in a rapidly changing business environment (de Schmidt and Ferreira da Silva, 2015). Our findings confirm that the relationship between EA and INN is statistically significant. Similarly, other factors such as government support, intervention, and policies all positively impact INN (Joo et al., 2018; Ortigueira-Sánchez et al., 2022).

While our analysis supports the existence of direct links between INN and EP (H2) and between EA and INN (H9), it does not support the existence of a direct link between EA and EP (H5). INN therefore plays a full mediating role between EA and EP. The lack of a direct link between EA and EP is inconsistent with the findings of the majority of EP studies (e.g., Faroque et al., 2021; Lages and Montgomery, 2005; Mostafiz et al., 2021; Sousa and Bradley, 2009) but supports the findings of studies like those of Njegić et al. (2020) and Faroque and Takahashi (2015). Assistance programmes may not directly impact SMEs' EP because their support only yields results over time. Practical experience in export management suggests that many mechanisms and processes mediate EA's effects on EP. EA provides SMEs with resources they need. Expertise, information, relationships, and INN are examples of exclusive and valuable resources that help to improve EP. SMEs that receive EA have competitive advantages over firms that do not solicit or cannot benefit from EA (e.g., they lack the resources to implement changes required to receive government incentives).

Both the links between EMO and INN (H10) and between INN and EP (H2) and the direct link between EMO and EP (H1) are significant. However, the link from EMO to INN to EP is statistically insignificant. Those contrasting findings suggest that INN only mediates the link between EMO and EP when INN is unaffected by the antecedent variables EA and EMO (Hair Jr et al., 2017; Baron and Kenny, 1986).

Our findings indicate that there are direct positive relationships between TR and EP (H3) and between COM and EP (H4). These findings are consistent with those of prior studies that found that RM behaviours and capabilities affect EP (e.g., Mahmoud et al., 2020; Hunt and Morgan, 1995). Moreover, this study's findings indicate that the link between TR and EMO (H7) and that between COM and EMO (H8) are significant. These findings are consistent with those of Lin et al. (2014) and Micheels and Gow (2011). SMEs that are highly dedicated to foreign markets are more inclined to focus on maintaining relationships and building TR and COM with stakeholders to improve their EP (Katsikeas et al., 2009; Genc et al., 2020). Since COM and TR are assets in export activities, they encourage export market–oriented behaviour. This study reaffirms that SMEs working to establish their MOs must prioritise long-term relationships with stakeholders (Hunt et al., 2006; Lin et al., 2014).

5.2 Theoretical implications

This paper makes numerous contributions to the literature on SMEs' EP and innovation capacity.

First, our research demonstrates that innovation capability affects EP in numerous ways. Several studies have examined how a firm's innovation capability affects its export activities. In EP models, INN generally functions as an antecedent and mediator

(Chen et al., 2016). Other studies have focused on INN in narrow domains, such as product innovation, process innovation, market innovation, exploitative innovation, and explorative innovation (Lisboa et al., 2011; Yalcinkaya et al., 2007). This study's primary contribution is demonstrating that INN plays a mediating function in the EA-EP relationship but has little involvement in the EMO-EP connection.

Second, this study demonstrates that the connection between EA and EP is indirectly significant and fully mediated by either innovation capability or EMO. Some researchers have claimed that EMO is an essential strategic process for export-oriented firms to convert their capabilities into performance (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993) while other researchers have contended that realising EMO's full benefits for export firms requires extra capabilities (Morgan et al., 2009). EA assists firms (Chen et al., 2016; de Schmidt and Ferreira da Silva, 2015). Our findings indicate that EA complements firms' abilities to transform the strategic process in order to enhance their performance (Mostafiz et al., 2021).

Third, this study contributes to the marketing relationship literature by providing evidence export firms must focus on TR and COM to maintain long-term relationships with various stakeholders. Since SMEs operate in an unpredictable international environment, enduring reciprocal relationships with relevant parties assist export managers in sustaining their firms' competitive advantages. The study is among the first to investigate correlations between TR and EP and between COM and EP, with EMO acting as a mediator. This study is also the first to empirically prove that such correlations exist for export firms (Paul et al., 2017; Payne and Frow, 2017; Hasaballah et al., 2019).

Fourth, this study is among the first to examine export SMEs' EP and its antecedents, including EA, EP, and RMT factors (TR and COM). A host of researchers have called for further research on these relationships, and ours is the first study to demonstrate it empirically in the context of exporting SMEs in emerging economies like Vietnam. Furthermore, the study is the first to investigate SMEs' export activities in a challenging agricultural economic region of a developing country (i.e., Mekong Delta). Exporters and policymakers in countries like Vietnam can benefit from this study's generalisable empirical findings.

5.3 Managerial implications

We have several recommendations for exporters, managers, and policymakers.

First, SME managers should take advantage of export support programmes. Any assistance is beneficial, regardless of whether it comes from a national or provincial government or a trade association. Depending on their resources and capabilities, SMEs need to focus on innovation capacity, specifically technological innovation, process innovation, operation and production innovation, and product innovation. INN enables firms to transform their resources and export support into EP. Furthermore, policymakers need to develop comprehensive export support programmes tailored to the resources available to the SMEs in each region. Implementation support, especially for technological innovation, for SMEs needs attention (de Schmidt and Ferreira da Silva, 2015).

Second, SMEs should focus on building and maintaining relationships with various stakeholders. These relationships will help SMEs to obtain and verify information on business projections and to sustain market share in competitive environments (Verma et

al., 2016). National and provincial policymakers are interested in supporting SMEs with laws, regulations, and timely information.

Third, governments' export orientation and policies should guide SMEs in developing export-oriented strategies. Governments should also implement EA programmes at different levels. They should also promote FTAs and ensure SMEs in under-resourced regions understand those agreements (Fulbright, 2020).

6 Conclusions

This study determined that EA, firm resources, EMO, INN, and marketing relationships enhance Vietnam SMEs' EP. We found strong empirical evidence that EMO, INN, COM, and TR significantly affect EP. EA from governmental and non-governmental organisations has no statistically significant impact on EP. However, when INN acts as a mediator, EA does improve SMEs' EP. Our research contributes to the EP literature and provides information to guide Vietnamese SMEs' decision-making so their export businesses can succeed.

6.1 Limitations and future research

Our research's limitations present avenues for future research to explore. We collected data from Vietnamese SMEs that export agricultural products. While Vietnamese SMEs are becoming more prominent in the global market, their innovation and marketing relationship operations may not be reflective of those of larger firms or SMEs in other countries.

Despite the large number of SMEs in the Mekong Delta, we could only analyse the 318 complete and usable responses we received. Though this sample size allowed for statistical analysis, caution should be exercised when generalising the results to SMEs across the region, other types of firms, and SMEs in other countries. Finally, several potentially important variables (such as competitiveness, culture, and ethnicity) should also be investigated in the future to enrich the import-export landscape of emerging countries. Further research should be conducted to replicate our findings and to clarify export support's impact on EP and changes' moderating effects on the relationships between EA, EMO, and RM factors and EP.

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Appendix

Table A1 Measurement scales and items

Constructs	*Code*	*Measured items*	*Sources*
Export assistance	EA1	Export assistance from national government agencies (such as finance, intelligence, and policy)	Faroque et al. (2021), and Sousa and Bradley (2009)
	EA2	Export assistance from provincial government agencies (such as finance, intelligence, and policy)	
	EA3	Export assistance from exporting associations and unions (such as distributors, export trading firms, Bentre coconuts associations)	
	EA4	Export assistance from international trade agreements (such as EVFTA, CPTPP, and RCEP)	
	EA5	In general, our firm has benefits from receiving export assistance.	
Trust	TR1	Our firm's stakeholders have so far been trustful in dealing with the export business.	Leonidou et al. (2002), and Hasaballah et al. (2019)
	TR2	When stakeholders make important decisions, they also consider our interests	
	TR3	stakeholders consider it important for our firm to be successful	
	TR4	In general, stakeholders have high integrity	
Commitment	COM1	Our firm preserves a long-lasting working relationship with stakeholders in the export business	Sichtmann and Von Selasinsky (2010), and Leonidou et al. (2002)
	COM2	Our firm invests a lot of effort in learning the 'ins and outs' of foreign distributors and customers	
	COM3	Our firm preserves exporting activities to be a valuable investment of resources	
	COM4	In general, our firm plans to make any effort and resources in the well-functioning of the working relationship.	
Export market orientation	EMO1	Our firm focuses on overseas customer satisfaction objectives	Ellis (2005) and Gregory et al. (2019)
	EMO2	Our firm seeks business opportunities in targeted foreign market areas where customers express their needs.	
	EMO3	Our firm usually does market research to forecast international customer demand	
	EMO4	Our firm knows our international competitors well	
	EMO5	Our firm responds rapidly to international competitor's actions	
	EMO6	In general, our firm spends time and effort developing export business	

Table A1 Measurement scales and items (continued)

Constructs	*Code*	*Measured items*	*Sources*
Innovation	INN1	Our firm usually renews the production and quality management systems	Gunday et al. (2011) and Altuntas et al. (2018)
	INN2	Our firm renews the organisation structure to facilitate coordination between different functions (etc., marketing and manufacturing)	
	INN3	Our firm renews the management information system and information sharing practice with stakeholder	
	INN4	Our firm renews the routines, procedures, and processes employed to execute firm activities in an innovative manner	
	INN5	Our firm renews general international marketing activities	
Export performance	EP1	Our firm's important markets have been profitable during the past three years	He et al. (2016) and Malca et al. (2021)
	EP2	Our firm's important markets have achieved sales growth during the past three years.	
	EP3	Our firm's important markets have achieved the current strategic objectives	
	EP4	In general, our business has achieved acceptable export performance during the last three years.	