



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***EFFECTS OF EXPORTER AND INTERMEDIARY CULTURAL
SIMILARITY ON RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN QUALITY AND EXPORT
PERFORMANCE OF SMEs***

NORLIZA HAMIR BASAH

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By

NORLIZA HAMIR BASAH

**Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School of Management, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

March 2018

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DEDICATION

TO MY LOVING FAMILY

Husband: Norjasofin Naja Mudin

My Princess: Nurzuyyin Damia

My Prince: Muhammad Rifqi Izz Zikry

WITH LOVE AND RESPECT

My parents: Hamir Basah and Khatijah

“Thank you for your endless supports and prayers”



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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By

NORLIZA HAMIR BASAH

March 2018

Chairman : Associate Professor Serene Ng Siew Imm, PhD
Faculty : Graduate School of Management, UPM

This study aims to examine the factors that influence the relationship between Malaysian exporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and exporter intermediaries (EIs) which could potentially impact exporters' performance. Building a relationship alone is not sufficient to achieve high export performance. The relationship quality (trust, commitment and cooperation) is critical as factors that should be managed by exporters to achieve sustainable relationships with their intermediaries in order to ensure an efficient internationalization process. Further, in order to develop such a relationship, cultural similarity between exporter and intermediary is suggested as an antecedent that can facilitate the development of a closer relationship.

The findings of the influence of the critical factors' (trust, commitment and cooperation) on the relationship between exporter and intermediary were mixed and inconclusive in the literature, particularly with regard to factors influence and how they influence exporters' performance. Drawing from the previous literature, this study attempts to investigate the mechanism by which cultural similarity leads to exporters' performance by focusing on five variables and one mediating factor (trust). Theoretical foundations were drawn from the Social Capital Theory (SCT), Internationalization Process Theory (IP) and Relational Exchange Theory (RET).

A quantitative method was employed in this study. Primary data were collected from a sample of 203 SME manufacturing exporting firms in Malaysia for empirical verification. Structural Equation Modeling (SmartPLS) was used for data analysis. The structural model analysis revealed that all the direct and mediation hypotheses

were significant. Twelve direct relationships were supported (cultural similarity-export performance; cultural similarity-effective communication; cultural similarity-knowledge sharing; effective communication-knowledge sharing; effective communication-trust; knowledge sharing-trust; trust-export performance; trust-commitment; trust-cooperation; commitment-cooperation; cooperation-export performance and cultural similarity-trust). Trust significantly serves as a mediator in the cultural similarity and export performance; effective communication and commitment, and knowledge sharing and cooperation relationships. The findings extended the application of the underpinning theories and their tenets in explaining the Malaysian SMEs' export performance use foreign intermediaries.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

KESAN PERSAMAAN BUDAYA DI ANTARA PENGEKSPORT DAN PERANTARA PADA KUALITI HUBUNGAN DAN PRESTASI EKSPORT IKS

Oleh

NORLIZA HAMIR BASAH

Mac 2018

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi perhubungan di antara firma eksport Industri Kecil dan Sederhana (IKS) di Malaysia dengan perantara (orang tengah) pengeksport yang berpotensi memberi kesan pada prestasi pengeksport. Membina perhubungan sahaja tidak mencukupi untuk mencapai prestasi eksport yang memberangsangkan. Oleh itu, kajian ini mencadangkan supaya faktor kualiti dalam perhubungan (kepercayaan, komitmen dan kerjasama) perlu diambil kira untuk kelangsungan perhubungan di antara pengeksport dan juga perantara pengeksport supaya proses mengeksport dapat berjalan lancar. Seterusnya, dalam usaha memartabatkan hubungan tersebut, persamaan budaya di antara pengeksport dan perantara telah dicadangkan sebagai pembolehubah/faktor asas yang dapat mewujudkan hubungan erat kedua-dua belah pihak.

Faktor-faktor kritikal (kepercayaan, komitmen dan kerjasama) yang boleh mempengaruhi hubungan di antara pengeksport dan perantara mempunyai dapatan kajian yang tidak konsisten hasil daripada kajian terdahulu terutamanya berkaitan dengan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi dan bagaimana faktor tersebut boleh mempengaruhi prestasi pengeksport. Berasaskan kajian terdahulu, penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji mekanisme persamaan budaya yang boleh menyumbang kepada peningkatan prestasi pengeksport berdasarkan lima faktor pembolehubah dan satu faktor perantara (kepercayaan). Antara teori-teori yang terlibat dalam kajian ini ialah Teori Modal Sosial (SCT), Teori Proses Pengantarabangsaan (IP) dan Teori Pertukaran Hubungan (RET).

Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif. Data primer telah diperolehi daripada sampel populasi 203 syarikat PKS yang terlibat dengan eksport dalam sektor pembuatan di Malaysia. Untuk tujuan menganalisis data “Structural Equation Modelling” (SmartPLS) telah digunakan. Dapatan hasil daripada analisis tersebut menunjukkan bahawa kesemua hipotesis langsung dan tidak langsung mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan. Dua belas hipotesis langsung disahkan mempunyai hubungan yang positif (persamaan budaya-prestasi eksport; persamaan budaya-komunikasi berkesan; persamaan budaya-perkongsian pengetahuan; komunikasi berkesan-perkongsian pengetahuan; komunikasi berkesan-kepercayaan; perkongsian pengetahuan – kepercayaan; kepercayaan -prestasi eksport; kepercayaan-komitmen; kepercayaan-kerjasama; komitmen-kerjasama; kerjasama-prestasi eksport dan persamaan budaya-kepercayaan). Faktor kepercayaan telah dikenalpasti sebagai pengantara kepada hubungan di antara persamaan budaya dan prestasi eksport; komunikasi berkesan dan komitmen serta perkongsian pengetahuan dan kerjasama. Kesimpulannya, dapatan hasil daripada kajian ini telah menyumbang kepada perkembangan teori dalam memperjelaskan prestasi pengeksport IKS yang menggunakan khidmat perantara asing.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 8 March 2018 to conduct the final examination of Norliza Hamir Basah on her thesis entitled “Effects of Exporter and Intermediary Cultural Similarity on Relationship between Quality and Export Performance of SMEs” in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

9MP	Ninth Malaysia Plan
10MP	Tenth Malaysia Plan
DOS	Department of Statistic
EPU	Economic Planning Unit
EI	Export Intermediary
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMP	Industrial Master Plan
ITI	International Trade Intermediary
MATRADE	Malaysia External Trade and Development Corporation
MIDA	Malaysian Industrial Development Authority
MITI	Ministry of International Trade and Industry
MYR	Malaysia Ringgit
NSDC	National SME Development Council
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SEM	Structural Equation Modeling
SMEs	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
SMIDEC	Small and Medium-sized Industry Development Corporation (former name of SME Corporation)
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
PLS	Partial Least Square
VAF	Variance Accounted For
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This study addresses the issues surrounding the relationship between exporters and intermediaries and their impact on performance outcomes of various small and medium sized manufacturing enterprises in Malaysia. As a developing country, Malaysia's economy predominantly depends on the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) sector. However, little attention has been paid to what are the mechanisms that Malaysia's SME exporters could potentially use to develop their relationship with foreign intermediaries in penetrating foreign markets. This study attempts to investigate the factors that affect the relationship between exporters and foreign intermediaries which possibly affect exporters' performance. The chapter begins with a description of the research background, which highlights the issues related to export performance. Then, the chapter draws attention to the research problem related to the study. Subsequently, the research questions and research objectives are established. Following this, the scope and significance of the study are specified. Finally, the operational definitions, the organization of all the chapters in this dissertation and the chapter summary are outlined.

1.2 Research Background

The rapid changes in the global environment are presenting small-and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) all around the world with both opportunities and challenges due to technological advances and competition. In the 21st century, the increasing level of competition has forced SMEs to change the mode of entry to amend their internalization process and leverage the business networks to penetrate foreign markets (Pinho, 2016; Razzaque & Boon, 2003). Whilst, the technological advances have accelerated the need for transformations in buyer-seller relationships to provide firms with competitive advantages (Pinho, 2016). To obtain a competitive edge and to provide superior value propositions in order to compete in the international arena, a network relationship is crucial in creating tangible and intangible assets especially for the initial and growth stages of SME firms (Senik, Isa, Scott-Ladd & Entekin, 2010). Through networking, an SME will be able to access various support and help including collaboration with government, friends, colleagues, external parties, agents, competitors and families (Johanson & Vahlne, 2003; Coviello & Munro, 1997).

Redding (1995) noted that Asian SME firms are recognized for utilizing networks and they actively seek "external relationships" (*e.g.*, intermediaries) as a source in obtaining information and expertise to assist their international competitiveness (Zhou & Xin, 2003). Significantly, networking can enhance knowledge related to foreign marketplaces and create more opportunities for the internationalization process (Zhao

& Hsu, 2007; Moen & Servais, 2002) through a high-quality relationship with network actors. As such, developing a high-quality network relationship must be one of the top priorities for building cross-border relationships, particularly for SME firms, as it can influence SMEs' international expansion and support exporters' export performance (Senik *et al.*, 2010; Ghauri, Lutz & Tesform, 2003).

Nowadays, relationship quality management has not only broadened in the marketing field, but now has been aggressively employed to interpret the international business, networking and inter-organizational phenomena (Pinho, 2016; Ural, 2009). Relationship quality can be defined as "an overall assessment of the strength of a relationship and the extent to which it meets the needs and expectations of the parties" (Smith, 1998, p. 78). It is regularly conceptualized as a higher-order construct such as trust, commitment and cooperation (*e.g.*, Erdil, 2014; Pinho, 2013; Kulhmeir & Knight, 2010), which has been identified as an important relational capital in international operations which can be useful through network ties to exploit global market opportunities and develop a high level of quality relationship (Behyan, Mohamad & Omar, 2011). The relational elements are more crucial in Asian countries for interpersonal relationships that benefit valuable social processes as impalpable assets compared with Western firms (Behyan *et al.*, 2011).

In this sense, smaller firms usually have limited tangible and intangible assets as well as financial constraints, human resource, knowledge, and experience limitation, and limitations in terms of international contact as compared with large multinational enterprises (Bianchi & Saleh, 2011). However, relatively little is known about how SMEs leverage intangible resources to overcome the lack of tangible resources to perform in overseas markets. In general, firms can choose several modes of entry such as exporting, joint venture, contractual agreements (*e.g.*, licensing), acquiring an existing company, and establishing wholly-owned subsidiaries (Pan & Tse, 2000). Nevertheless, as they lack substantial resources to undertake foreign direct investment and other costly entry modes, traditionally, exporting is used as the initial stage of the internationalization (Lehtinen, Ahokangas & Lu, 2016; Leonidou, Katsikeas & Coudounaris, 2010; Bowyer, 2002) and these firms gradually evolve into foreign-based operations (Hollensen, 1998). Within the exporting mode, firms have two channel options: either to export directly to an importer in a foreign market or through indirect exporting with the assistance of intermediaries (Peng & York, 2001; Root, 1998). Due to their (SMEs) smaller sizes and coupled with some resource limitations, SME exporting firms usually choose indirect exporting to develop a relationship network with various types of foreign intermediaries such as distributors, sales representatives, agents or an Export Management Company [EMC] (Peng & York, 2001; Root, 1994).

As middlemen, export intermediaries play a crucial role in international trade because of the complex transactional link between individuals and organizations due to geographically distinct markets (Peng & York, 2001). Intermediaries will take responsibility for the distribution of products and who will also manage all related

sales and service activities with the foreign customers (Erdil, 2014; Hessels & Terjesen, 2007; Fletcher, 2004). As such, choosing a competent and reliable foreign intermediary is of great importance as it can help an exporter to overcome the complexities inherent in exporting, and enable them to eventually succeed in managing their foreign operations (Kuhlmeier & David, 2010). In other words, the development of close relationships and intimacy between exporters and intermediaries has been important for theoretical as well as practical work (Nielson, 1998).

However, from another point of view, using the services of intermediaries has sometimes resulted in three major concerns among SME exporters. First, business relationships between exporter and intermediary normally incur high transaction costs and expose SMEs to many problems, which could result in further increasing their total costs (Pinho, 2013). Second, using intermediaries can also mean losing control of the foreign operation and this could increase the risk of conflict between the SME firms and the partners (Blomstermo, Sharma & Sallis, 2006). Exporters can also suffer because of their loss of control during the operations (Root, 1994) in-terms of marketing strategy, reputation, selection of customer and managing of resources (Pidduck, 2006). Third, Solberg (2006c) highlighted that the dissimilarity of cultures between exporters and intermediaries can impede the growth of business relationships. In a similar vein, Meirovich (2012) claimed that cultural factors can be a major contributor to failure in partnerships across borders. Additionally, academicians and practitioners have also proposed that national and organizational cultures play crucial roles in determining the success of partnerships in international businesses (Xie, Wu, & Zeng, 2016; Meirovich, 2012).

However, with regard to the issue of indirect exporting, limited work has been conducted that investigates SMEs' use of intermediaries (Lehtinen *et al.*, 2016). Previous literature has adequately discussed the direct export mode especially used by SMEs. Extant literature on SME exporters using intermediaries in SME firms has so far been focused on developed countries (*e.g.*, Solberg, 2006c), with a dearth of empirical evidence from a developing country's perspective. The concepts concerning the relationship between SME exporters and foreign intermediaries have been mainly reported based on evidence from developed countries (Saleh, Ali & Julian, 2014). Nevertheless, the variation of characteristics, differences in terms of political stability, income, level of technology, infrastructure, natural resources endowments, and nature of industrial organization make a developing country significantly different from a developed country context and so the results of these previous studies cannot be generalized (Bianchi & Saleh, 2011). Such variation and differences can adversely affect international exchange opportunities and exchange partners' behavior (Frazier, Gill & Kale, 1989).

In spite of the growing literature on some emerging economies such as China, India and Thailand, findings from Malaysia are still lacking (Senik, Isa, Sham & Ayob, 2014). In this context of the study, Malaysia is a middle-class, middle-income nation and has been recognized as rapidly developing economy in Asia which strongly

supports the internationalization of SMEs as the backbones of the Malaysian economy. SME firms in Malaysia have a stronger tendency to internationalize predominantly through exporting (75%) and most SME firms in Malaysia use intermediaries' services (e.g., distributors, sales representative or agents) as indirect exporting activities (Senik *et al.*, 2014). Despite the importance of indirect exporting and the growing importance of what factors consequently influence the relationship quality between exporters and intermediaries, only a limited numbers of studies have been discovered that discuss the trigger factors in developing, establishing, and maintaining relationship quality in cross-border relationships, especially from an Asian perspective in general and within the Malaysia context specifically (Ahmadian, 2012). Given these concerns, the indirect exporting mode within the Malaysia context deserves research attention to enhance understanding and identify the critical factors that influence the relationship quality between SME Malaysian exporters and foreign intermediaries.

Furthermore, Erdil (2014) and Pinho (2013) have asserted that the existence of a conceptual framework of exporters and intermediaries' relationship quality is still lacking and needs to be discussed conclusively to identify the trigger factors that may influence the growth of a quality relationship between SME exporters and their foreign intermediaries. This is in line with Ural (2009), who noted that the importance and benefits of high-quality relationships are widely recognized; nevertheless, only a few research efforts have been undertaken to identify the major factors or possible predictors that influence the relationship quality between exporters and foreign intermediaries. Therefore, an inclusive framework for researching this issue is strongly recommended (Erdil, 2014; Pinho, 2013).

Although factors such as trust, commitment and cooperation seem quite meaningful in explaining the influence the exporters and intermediaries' relationship quality, cultural issues are also embedded which may vary between developed and developing nations, and this factor also warrants further examination (Saleh *et al.*, 2014). This notion was also highlighted previously by Solberg (2006c) that the dissimilarity of cultures between exporters and intermediaries can impede the growth of strategic relationships. Expanding abroad still includes many challenges, such as the cultural differences that exist inside a nation and these differences can have most dramatic effect ones are often faced when crossing national borders. The exchange relationship is remarkably more impeded and affected by dissimilar cultural backgrounds (Ural, 2009). As claimed by Conway and Swift (2000) when a high level of psychic distance exists, the development and establishment of a business relationship can be damaged.

In a similar vein, Rodriguez and Wilson (2002) argue that differences in terms of cultural background will contribute to the emergence of communication problems, distrust and distance in interpersonal relationships. Due to this constraint, Internationalization Process (IP) theory suggests that cultural similarity is a catalyst for international business actors to communicate effectively and provides the impetus for sharing knowledge and information from culturally proximal markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). In this sense, exporters who have a similar cultural background to

their foreign intermediaries in terms of addressing people, business practices, legal formalities, ethics and values and business contracts will face fewer barriers to communicate effectively and share knowledge, which in turn helps to develop trust (Saleh *et al.*, 2014; Swift, 1999) as a central role in developing the relationship quality between SME exporters and intermediaries.

In addition, by sharing a similar cultural background firms foster more confidence for relationship continuity and consequently invite the existence of trust between each other that would lead to them making a stronger commitment to and cooperating more (Pinho, 2016) in such relationships (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987). This is because relational exchanges evolve at a slow pace, starting with minor transactions in which little trust is required because little risk is involved, in which both partners can prove their trustworthiness, thus, enabling them to expand their relations and engage in major transactions (Blau, 1968). In this case, trust is an integral part of a process in which the parties gradually build up a mutual trust as a bridge from which to extend a long-term relationship. This notion was supported by Morgan and Hunt (1994) who asserted that trust is the key element in developing a relationship to drive commitment and cooperation, and then eventually impact the performance outcomes. Trust is central to all relational exchanges overseas (Alves, Barros, Antonio & Raposo, 2013; Hewett, Money & Sharma, 2002). In other words, relational factors would be an intangible asset and a unique competence for building strong, high-quality relationships which in turn lead to higher profitability and influence the export performance (Danik & Kowalik, 2015).

However, empirical research on relational factors that underlie SME international success is limited (Kuhlmeir & Knight, 2010). Therefore, this study attempts to extend the understanding of relationship quality and include the cultural perspective as an equally important factor in the relationship between exporters and intermediaries. This is because in today's globalizing world, cultural similarity is more important than ever before especially when considering the comprehensive nature of culture (Ural, 2009) as it can act as a selective screen between people and the world. This situation has been supported by Stepien and Sulimowska-Formowicz (2015) who asserted that cultural similarity is considered one of the conditions for a cooperative relationship. In line with this notion, Parsons (1964) posits that the culture can show of human societies as a coherent whole, harmonious and functional in relation to the imperatives of the social systems and believing that the social order will eventually be formed whenever the symbolic values are formulated in a coherent and harmonious manner. This is then internalized by social actors; good relationships could possibly be achieved via similar cultural background.

As such, in introducing a relationship, cultural similarity is required as it has been identified as a major influencing factor that can assist exporters and intermediaries to extend the connections for cross-border relationships (Froese & Paolo, 2009). However, there are limited studies related to how SME exporters capitalize on and manage the relationship with intermediaries to avoid conflicts and compensate their

scarce resources to enhance their export performance (Mac & Evangelista, 2016; Theingi & Purchase, 2011). For these reasons, it is relevant and timely for this study to identify the critical factors that lead to higher-quality relationships between exporters and intermediaries consequently influencing international performance outcome which focus on Malaysia as a developing nations.

1.3 Industry Issues Relating To Export Performance In Malaysia

Similar to many other countries in the world, SMEs in Malaysia are considered as the backbone for the nation's economic generation (Mohamad, 2012). SMEs are important contributors to the economic development in Malaysia as they account for 97% of the total business establishments in the country (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015 & SME Corporation, 2015), where they contributed 19% of the total exports (DOS, 2015; SME Corporation, 2015). Malaysia is a country in which the government is highly supportive of the process of internationalization by SMEs aimed at improving exporting activities and the country's trade performance (Ahmadian, 2012). Export performance is the indicator of a country's economic growth and is also important for a firm's competitiveness (Zou, Taylor, & Osland, 1998).

To facilitate the entry of SMEs into international markets, the Malaysian government has incorporated many exporting assistance programs to encourage more SMEs to be involved in exporting. For example, one of the programs organized by the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) and the SME Corporation is called the "Going Export (GoEx) program". Under this program, the SME Corporation identified 100 to 150 export-ready small-and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) per year to be involved in exporting activities (MATRADE, 2014). This effort is consistent with the initiatives by SME institutions worldwide, which are constantly finding ways to extend the productivity of SMEs because this sector reflects the growth of a country's economy (Mohamad, 2012).

However, despite the government assistance and high levels of support for exports to penetrate foreign markets, evidence shows that SMEs are under-performing, as their contribution toward the country's GDP is only around 33%, which is lower than that of other middle-income nations where the minimum achievement is 39% (DOS, 2015; SME Corporation, 2015). Specifically, *Figure 1.1* shows that the sector contributes 33% to the nation's GDP, and 57% for employment opportunities (DOS, 2015 & SME Corporation, 2015). The figures also indicate that the SMEs' share in the international market is often noticeably lower than their share in gross domestic product (GDP). For instance, Malaysia's GDP was worth about MYR750 billion in 2010 in the world's economy, whilst MYR64 billion were contributed by national exports (Bank Negara Malaysia Report, 2011). These figures highlight the big gap between SMEs' contribution to GDP and national exports which indicates that the contribution of SMEs in terms of export revenue is still lower than their contribution to GDP.

Moreover, the statistic from a World Bank Enterprise Report (2014) revealed that Malaysia's contribution to employment GDP and total exports was still low in comparison to many other Asian countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Republic of China (RC) and Indonesia (*see Chapter 2*). As noted by Datuk Seri Mustapha Muhammad, Minister of International Trade and Industry (MITI), SMEs in Malaysia have broadened their export base but their level of participation in export activities remains low (MITI, 2014).

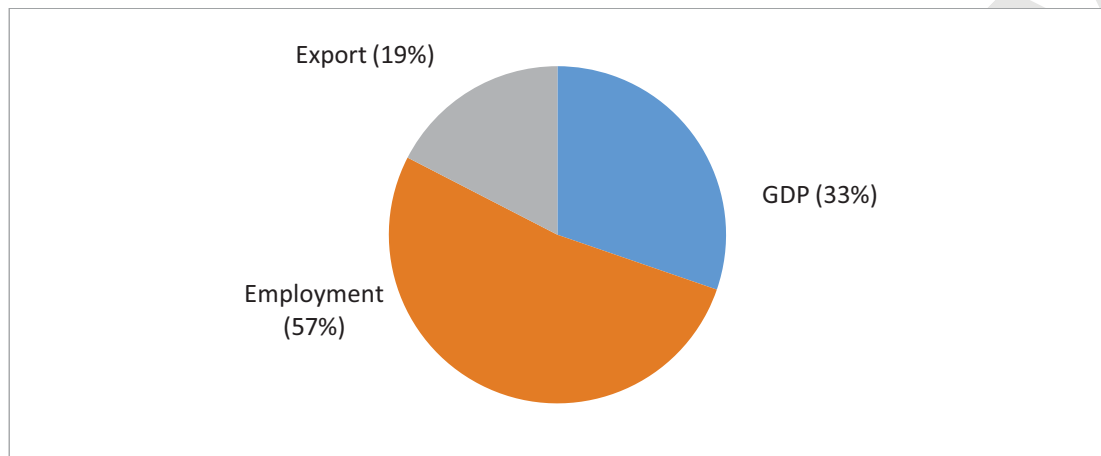


Figure 1.1 : The Contribution of SMEs to the Malaysian Economy
(Sources : DOS 2015 and SME Corporation 2015)

Even though Malaysia is a developing country that is progressively assisting SMEs to become international players, two more specific evidents of Malaysian SMEs shows it is still under-performing in its exporting activities. First, SMEs account for up to 90% of the total number of firms in the Malaysian manufacturing sector; however, they only contribute a modest 10.8% of the country's total exported manufacturing products (MATRADE, 2014). Second, in relation to this issue, the question that arises is: "Why majority of SMEs not exporting?" These facts suggest that most Malaysian SMEs are dependent on the local market, and are not taking advantage of the available opportunities in the export markets (Saleh & Ndubisi, 2006).

Taking cognizance of the small contribution of SMEs toward total exports and the significant roles that SMEs can play, Datuk Dr Wong Lai Sum, the former CEO of the SME Corporation, claimed that the use of intermediaries may be a good option. This is because exporters need the assistance of intermediaries, as they play the role of market linkers or the third party that will guide exporting SMEs to get potential buyers (MATRADE, 2014). This concurs with empirical studies which reported firms that intend to penetrate foreign markets are more likely to succeed if they use intermediaries (Suwannarat, 2016; Felbermayr & Jung, 2011). Employing intermediaries may be gaining popularity among newly exporting SMEs. Nevertheless, one of the possible reasons that may stop SME firms from being involved in indirect exporting activities is their lack of confidence in managing

exporter-intermediary relationships in foreign markets. This is possibly due to the significant challenges in building a successful business relationship, which usually involves high transactional costs (Erdil, 2014; Pinho, 2013; Nevin & Money, 2008; Solberg, 2006c). This warrants further research on the factors that can explain the export performance of SMEs that uses intermediaries.

As suggested in the related literature, effective management of exporter-intermediary relationships should include elements like similarity in culture, effective communication, knowledge sharing, trust, commitment and cooperation, which is very crucial (Knight, 2001; Peng & Ilinitch, 1998) as the relationship and dedication of the export intermediary towards increasing sales of the exporting SMEs' products can be significant in improving export performance (Martini, Carvino, Doni & Rigolini, 2016; Racela, Chaikittisilpa & Thoumrungroje, 2007). Therefore, research on this issue is relevant and timely.

1.4 Research Problem

Three research gaps have been identified from the literature. First, the influence of culture on export performance has not been conclusively demonstrated. Over the decades, national and organizational cultures have been acknowledged as playing a crucial role in the success of partnerships across borders. Ironically, culture is also being blamed for causing failure in developing relationships with foreign partners. However, within the context of the exporter-intermediary relationship, the influence of culture has seldom been investigated (Erdil, 2014; Pinho, 2013; MacDuffie, 2011). The issue of whether culture promotes or hampers exporter-intermediary performance needs to be addressed since more and more SMEs are going global via intermediaries (Pinho, 2013; Meirovinch, 2012; Nevins & Money, 2008). Export performance can arguably be improved by the application of the internationalization Process (IP) theory which proposes the concept of "psychic closeness" to promote performance. The IP theory explains that cultural similarity may facilitate the development of cross-border relationships in the international arena.

As claimed by Solberg (2006c), managing relationships between exporters and intermediaries is very challenging due to the complexities of doing business across national and cultural boundaries. Shamkarmahesh, Ford and Latour (2003), highlighted that culture is useful for describing the problems that exist between exporters and intermediaries that in turn affect the evaluation of performance (Lin & Zhao 2016; Nevin & Money, 2008). Acknowledging the inconsistent results between culture and performance relationship, some researchers have suggested that partners have to be similar in certain characteristics but different in others (*e.g.*, Xie, Wu & Zeng, 2016; Krishnan, Miller & Judge, 1997; Marosini, Shane & Singh, 1998). Notwithstanding, there is a general consensus in the literature that a cultural fit (similarity) is essential to create collaboration as well as to enhance performance (Zheng, Lin, Bluemling, Chen & Mol, 2013; Meirovinch, 2012). However, there is limited empirical research that has tested the impact of cultural similarity between

exporters and intermediaries on SMEs' performance in the Malaysia context. Thus, further investigation is critical to understand how culture influences the SME exporters and intermediary relationship to improve export success.

Second, the mechanism by which cultural similarity influences firm performance has not been extensively researched previously. Findings on the cultural similarity and export performance relationship are inconclusive in previous studies (*e.g.*, Lehtinen *et al.*, 2016; Sirmon & Lane, 2004; Pothukuchi, Damanpour, Choi, Chen & Park, 2002; Smith, 1998; Lane & Beamish, 1990), thus suggesting there may be several potential variables that influence the relationship. Consistent with the IP theory, variables like effective communication and knowledge sharing have been found to be the immediate outcomes of cultural similarity, which are crucial to create a high-quality relationship that could translate into export performance.

However, previous studies seemed to have overlooked the importance of psychic closeness in the exporter-intermediary relationship. Hence, it is important to take into account the fact that similarity in culture between home and host country might affect firm performance, as posited under the IP theory (Saleh *et al.*, 2014). However, while the IP theory suggests that cultural similarity can enhance performance, it does not explain how cultural similarity can lead to a better relationship between exporter and intermediary to enhance performance. This is very important because a similar cultural background alone is not sufficient to lead to excellent export performance, as it needs a quality relationship to result in enhanced performance of both exporters and intermediaries. Thus, in response to these gaps, the integration of the Relational Exchange Theory (RET) link supports the process approach that cultural similarity can create effective communication among partners (exporters-intermediaries) due to similarities in terms of business practices, legal formalities, business ethics and business agreements, which are the impetus for sharing knowledge and bringing about a quality relationship (*e.g.*, trust, commitment and cooperation) between exporters and intermediaries (Saleh *et al.*, 2014; Swift, 1999). This is because the RET highlights the importance of trust which leads to commitment and cooperation which then translate to higher export performance.

Nevertheless, to date, there are limited studies that explain the crucial role of the relationship quality characteristic which includes trust, commitment and cooperation (Bloemer, Pluymaekers & Odekerken, 2013; Erdil, 2014) that link the exporter and intermediary relationship. As emphasized by Erdil (2014), the reason to consider the relational perspective is because exporting does not only involve economic or business transactions, it is also heavily dependent on the relationship quality between parties. This is consistent with Morgan, Vorhies and Schlegelmilch (2006), who claimed that a firm's relational elements are crucial for the success of its export operations (Hador, 2017). Thus, this study closes the research gap in terms of a mechanism for how cultural similarity between partners (exporter-intermediary) explains the performance of exporters.

Third, the mediating role of trust in the internationalization process is also under-researched. It has been suggested in previous literature that a relational element such as trust is the most important element (Wheelan, 2016; Lieu, Li & Zhang, 2010; Nevin & Money, 2008; Saleh *et al.*, 2014) for developing a quality relationship and promoting exchange relationships (Hador, 2017; Jap & Anderson, 2003) in the international context. Indeed, in cross-cultural settings, the effect of trust has become all the more salient (Sullivan & Peterson, 1982) as it plays a critical role in overcoming the challenges. In other words, the lack of trust is at the heart of many channel conflicts that engender dissatisfaction in international business relationships (Kiessling & Harvey, 2006), in turn, affecting export performance. Hence, trust is very important for improving relationships and introducing strategic plans to build competitive advantage. Such relationships, if well maintained, can help SMEs to successfully face challenges in the international platform (Bello, Chelariu & Zhang, 2003; Kuhlmeir & Knight, 2010). This is further stressed by Obadia (2010), who pointed out that the success of international businesses relies more heavily on relational factors than on operational factors.

However, analysis of the applicability of relational elements embedded in the economic exchange is scant (Pinho, 2013; Granovetter, 1985), which is really important particularly for businesses in Asian countries (Hutchings & Weir, 2006b). Consequently, this presents an opportunity to close the gap by testing the applicability of relational elements (*e.g.*, trust) in enhancing export performance. This is because most Asian business managers believe that relational factors are essential, especially in the initial stage of the business (Clarke, Chandra & Machado, 2016; Tseng, 2011). This notion has been supported by Martini, Corvino, Doni and Rigolini (2016) and Zaheer, McEvelly and Perrone (1998), who identified that trust is a crucial element that can lead to better performance. However, previous findings are mixed where some researchers have reported that trust has a significant influence on performance (*e.g.*, Zhang, Cavusgil & Roath, 2003; Nevins & Money, 2008), while others have reported no significant relationship that links trust and performance (*e.g.*, Katsikeas, Skarmas & Bello, 2009; Zaheer & Kamal, 2011). The Social Capital Theory (SCT) suggests that trusted relationships lead to better firm performance, while the RET proposes that trusted exchanges lead to positive output. Both themes highlight the importance of trust in relationships.

Meanwhile, Houjeir and Brennan (2017) and MacDuffie (2011) strongly emphasize that culture has a significant influence on trust. This argument is also supported by Johanson and Mattson (2015), who highlighted that a similar culture in terms of business practices and values is the impetus for trust building between transacting parties through easy communication, quick learning and knowledge generating processes. Following this notion, it is likely that cultural similarity is instrumental for the development of trust in SMEs, subsequently resulting in better export performance. There exists a gap in the identification of the relevant determinants (trust) that link cultural similarity to the export performance of SMEs. This seems to imply that trust plays a significantly central role in maintaining relationship quality which links cultural similarity to export performance. In other words, trust can

potentially mediate the relationship between cultural similarity and export performance between exporter and intermediary. Similarity in cultural settings enhances trustworthiness, which can lead to the development of a high-quality relationship between exporters and intermediaries, thus resulting in better export performance. As such, these studies integrate the SCT, IP and RET theories by explicating the process of how cultural similarity is deployed, and then links them to relational factors that eventually can be translated to improved firm performance.

In addition, according to Mac and Evangelista (2016) and Musteen, Francis and Datta (2010), limited studies have specifically examined trust and export performance in the SME setting. Findings from other types of companies such as multinational companies are not suitable for use as multinational companies differ significantly in terms of their large size and are thus inappropriate for generalizing in the context of SMEs. More importantly, there are calls for more research on trust across borders (*e.g.*, MacDuffie, 2011; Katsikeas *et al.*, 2009; Zaheer & Kamal, 2011). Hence, this study proposes closing the gap by investigating how trust plays a role in the relationship between SME exporters and intermediaries.

1.5 Research Questions

In view of the gaps in the literature as summarized above, this study has intended to close these gaps by answering the following research questions, with the central research question being:

What are the mechanisms by which cultural similarity leads to export performance?

The central research question above leads to a few specific research questions:

RQ1 : What is the relationship between cultural similarity and export performance?

RQ2 : What are the inter-relationships between cultural similarity, effective communication, knowledge sharing, trust, commitment, cooperation and export performance?

RQ3 : Does trust mediate the relationship between cultural similarity and export performance, effective communication and commitment, and knowledge sharing and cooperation?

1.6 Research Objectives

To answer the above research questions, this study develops and tests a research framework that explains the performances of SMEs based on the SCT, IP and RET theories. The general research objective is:

To examine the mechanism by which cultural similarity leads to export performance

The main research objective leads to a few specific research objectives:

RO1 : To examine the relationship between cultural similarity and export performance.

RO2 : To determine the inter-relationship between cultural similarity, effective communication, knowledge sharing, trust, commitment, cooperation and export performance.

RO3 : To assess the mediation effect of trust in the relationship between cultural similarity and export performance, effective communication and commitment, and knowledge sharing and cooperation.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This current research provides three pragmatic additions of theoretical contributions. First, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge by examining the influence of cultural similarity and export performance using the IP theory that specifically relates to international settings (Saleh *et al.*, 2014). Little is known about cultural similarity and the impact of relational attributes in understanding the development of exporter and intermediary relationships. The existing literature showed that relatively little attention has been paid to the investigation of cultural similarity in the international exchange process, particularly regarding exporters' performance (Saleh & Ndubisi, 2006).

Earlier studies that have applied these theories in cross-border partner relationships (Johanson & Vahlne, 2006) have not extended the applicability of the theories to the exporter-intermediary context. Motivated by this gap, this research proposes three antecedents generated from the IP theory which are cultural similarity as a fundamental factor of the relationship, effective communication and knowledge sharing. In previous studies the researchers have been concerned with cultural distance that impacts export performance (*e.g.*, Nes, Solberg & Silkoset, 2007; Lee, Jeong, Lee & Sung, 2008). Using a similar approach, this study tests if cultural similarity affects SMEs' export performance and if the similar aspects are significant in determining export performance. Studying the exporter and intermediary's cultural similarity is

expected to give a better understanding of how it can help in developing strategic partnerships that contribute to the enhancement of export performance.

Second, this research incorporates the SCT, IP theory and RET in an attempt to explain the mechanism by which cultural similarity leads to increased export performance. These theories describe the crucial factors related to relational capital to develop quality relationships which could transform the relationship between exporters and intermediaries into enhanced export performance. There is an increasing interest in the international business sector, especially in relation to the crucial role that relational factors play in the process of internationalization especially for SMEs (Pinho, 2013; Torkkeli, Puumalainen, Saarenketo & Kuivalainen, 2012; Zarei, Nasserri & Tajeddin 2011; Musteen, Francis & Dania, 2010; Kiss & Danis, 2010; Coviello, 2006; Ellis & Pecotich, 2001;). The most important element in relational factors is trust (Gulati & Singh, 1998). However, relational factors have so far been neglected as providing a plausible explanation for the problem of export success, especially in analyzing the exporter and intermediary context and from the cross-cultural and social capital perspectives (Pinho, 2013).

Even though understanding buyer and seller relationships receiving increasing attention (Hador, 2017; Wheelan, 2016; Erdil, 2014), the literature offers little empirical evidence of how various dimensions of social capital affect export performance. These social capital factors are very important as the nature and quality of relational exchanges for investment yield dividends in the long run (Pinho, 2012). Thus, in an attempt to provide further understanding regarding this phenomenon, the present research has pushed the current frontiers by linking relational factors and export performance. Also, this research proposes that relational factors (*e.g.*, trust) act as a mediator between antecedent factors and export performance.

Third, this study adds to the extant literature by examining SME business relationships in a developing country setting. Earlier studies have invariably focused on exporter and intermediary relationships from a developed country perspective (Pinho, 2013). Obviously, the variations of per capita income, political stability and infrastructural conditions (Bianchi & Saleh, 2011), natural resources, level of advanced technology and the nature of the way the industry is organized make a developing country's market significantly dissimilar to those of developed countries (Saleh *et al.* 2014; Toyne, 1989). For example, different levels of income can negatively impact international exchange options and the behavior of exchange partners. The relationship variables are also inherent in cultural issues that may differ between developed and developing countries, and this also requires further examination (Saleh, *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, this study identifies and verifies new findings that are more relevant to SMEs in developing countries like Malaysia.

From another point of view, there are two practical contributions from this study to SME managers and government bodies involved in policy-making decisions with regard to the SME sector. Firstly, this study demonstrates that cultural similarity is

related to improving the export performance of SMEs by strengthening relational capital (*i.e.*, trust). The study provides information to SMEs on how intermediary and exporter relationships can be better established and developed, thus helping realize the government's mission of improving the national export sector and achieving a favorable trade balance between imports and exports. This study should be able to support SME export managers to build business relationships and networks with their intermediaries to enhance export performance and indirectly meet the government's objectives and aspirations.

In addition, this research also offers new insights for practitioners or SME export managers to develop better and more intimate relationships and gain the benefit of relationship quality factors such as trust, commitment and cooperation. They can also increase their understanding on how to utilize relational capital to successfully develop a strong relationship between two parties and simultaneously increase the performance of exports and survive longer in the foreign market.

Secondly, as explained earlier, about 90% of Malaysian manufacturing SMEs are still not participating in the export market (MATRADE, 2014). Thus, it is salient to probe into this issue from a different perspective. Consequently, studying crucial aspects such as cultural similarity (*e.g.*, manner of greetings, business practices, legal formalities, ethical values and business contracts) between exporters and intermediaries would help to improve understanding, specifically in an international setting. It is very important to identify and study this context so that it will help the government to support more SMEs to go abroad and not be apprehensive of using intermediaries to assist them in getting started and expanding. Overall, this study therefore provides insights that could help improve exporter-intermediary relationships as well as performance.

1.8 Scope of the Study

The geographical scope of this study is Malaysia, covering Peninsular Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak which has been recognized as a rapidly developing South-east Asian country (Zizah *et al.*, 2014; Sambasivan, Abdul & Yusop, 2009). The economy of the country depends largely on business-oriented organizations like SMEs, which account for more than 97% of the total business establishments in Malaysia. The government aims to achieve a developed and high-income nation status, and thus hopes the SMEs can be an important driver of growth (DOS, 2015; SME Corporation, 2015). Expanding and developing SME growth through internationalization or exporting is a national economic goal and remains the focus of the government's initiatives. Accordingly, SMEs in Malaysia seem to have developed an increased interest in exporting activities (Chelliah, Sulaiman & Pandian, 2010). Thus, researching the factors that affect SMEs' export performance is relevant and can provide insights to SMEs on ways to manage their export activities.

This study employs a quantitative survey approach where SME manufacturing firms which export their products through exporting intermediaries were contacted and invited to participate. Only the persons-in-charge of export services or individuals who have substantial knowledge of the SMEs' exporting activities were invited to answer the survey. The survey questionnaire was disseminated using a mail technique, followed up by emails and telephone calls to achieve a reasonable and acceptable response rate.

1.9 Operational Definitions

This section serves as a preview of the details discussed in Chapter 2. In order to avoid any potential confusion in interpretation of the concepts employed in this research, the definitions and terminologies used in this research are presented below:

1.9.1 Relationship Quality

Griffith and Harvie (2001, p. 94) who defined relationship quality as “the strength of an inter-organizational relationship and the potential for the relationship to continue the process of development”.

1.9.2 Culture

Hofstede (1980, p. 25) defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one human group from another”

1.9.3 Cultural Similarity

According to Swift (1999), cultural similarity is the cultural closeness that overcomes cultural barriers and enables people to attain a greater degree of closeness.

1.9.4 Effective Communication

Effective communication in this research is defined as the extent to which the partners of the exchange relationship engage in the obvious and unrestricted sharing of information as they work towards overcoming obstructions as well as achieving success (Saleh *et al.*, 2014; Nes *et al.*, 2007).

1.9.5 Knowledge sharing

In this study, knowledge sharing refers to “leveraging information assets across various business partners to concentrate on supply chain activities, identify market opportunities, and/or capture business value” (Park & Lee, 2014, p.70).

1.9.6 Trust

Throughout this study, the definition of trust is confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity, and relies on a set of beliefs that the other partner will refrain from opportunistic behaviour and will not take advantage of the situation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

1.9.7 Commitment

Commitment in this study is based on the definition by Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23): “as an exchange partner’s belief that an ongoing relationship with another is so important that it warrants maximum efforts to maintain it”.

1.9.8 Cooperation

Cooperation in this study is defined as a process of joint effort, team spirit and collaboration of both partners to work together to achieve mutual goals (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

1.9.9 Export Performance

Export performance is generally described as the outcome of a firm’s export activities in a foreign market (Katsikeas, Piercy & Ioannidis, 1996; Nes *et al.*, 2007). For the purpose of this study, export performance is measured based on export sales, export sales growth in the foreign market, export profitability, market share, and changes in profits and sales as a result of using intermediary services.

1.10 Organization of the Dissertation

This thesis comprises seven interrelated chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction chapter consisting of the research background, research problem, research questions, research objectives, significance of the study, scope of the study and operational definitions related to this study. Chapter 2 discusses relevant literature and theories related to the independent variables, mediating variables and dependent variables. It also provides an overview of SMEs, exporting in Malaysia, social capital and other variables related and contributing to this study. Chapter 3 translates the analysis of the literature review into a workable research framework and presents the research hypotheses. Chapter 4 elaborates the selection of the research strategies, methods and procedures in pursuing the objectives of this study. In particular, the chapter focuses on instrument development, population and sample description. Chapter 5 reports the results of the data analysis by delivering empirical evidence to answer the hypotheses. Meanwhile, Chapter 6 provides the discussion based on research findings in accordance with relevant theoretical backgrounds and past findings. Chapter 7 as the final chapter of the thesis concludes the findings and highlights the implications of the study for academicians, practitioners and policy makers. Subsequently, the limitations of the study and future research avenues are presented. This chapter ends with a summary of the overall thesis.

1.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter provides the relevant information details that clearly identify the gaps in the literature. Its objective is to provide the reader with the rationale and logical argument for the development of the research design and the formulation of the research questions, research objectives and significance of the study, all of which justify the importance of this research.

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