

Learning Orientation and Business Performance of Women-Owned SMEs in Malaysia: the Mediating Effect of Competitive Advantage

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine the mediating effect of competitive advantage on the relationship between learning orientation and performance of women-owned SMEs in Malaysia. It proposed a quantitative analysis in which learning orientation and sources of competitive advantage are key success factors of SMEs. To answer the research questions, three hypotheses were formulated; (a) There is significant relationship between learning orientation and business performance, (b) There is significant relationship between learning orientation and competitive advantage, and (c) competitive advantage mediates the relationship between learning orientation and performance. Data were collected by means of a structured mail survey questionnaire completed by women owner/managers randomly selected from a sampling frame of registered SMEs. The questionnaires were developed from prior research and previously tested for reliability, and performance measurement was based on subjective evaluation involving self-reported measures. The findings reveal that significant relationships exist between learning orientation and performance, and between learning orientation and competitive advantage, while competitive advantage was found to fully mediate the learning orientation and performance relationships. These findings may be of help to the women owner/managers of SMEs to be more learning oriented and developed competitive edge in order for them to survive the intensely competitive market environment.

Keywords: Women owned SMEs, learning orientation, competitive advantage, business performance

1 Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) play an increasingly important role in the economic growth of most nations. SMEs have become important as a source of employment and maximize the efficiency of the resource allocation and distribution by mobilizing and utilizing local human and material resources (Cunningham & Rowley, 2007). SMEs also act as supplier of goods and service to large organizations. Most SMEs have been characterized as dynamic, innovative, efficient and their small size allows for flexibility, immediate feedback, short decision-making chain, better understanding and quicker response to customer needs (Singh, Garg & Deshmukh, 2008). Nevertheless, they are on tremendous pressure to sustain in domestic as well as global markets owing to global competition, technological advances and changing needs of customers. In Malaysia, the last few decades also saw a tremendous increased in participation of SMEs which are seen to be playing a major role for the nation's economic development (Abd Aziz & Mahmood, 2011; Idar & Mahmood, 2011). In addition, a large number of these SMEs are owned and operated by women (Alam, Mohd Jani & Omar, 2011). However, research on women owned SMEs are still minimal especially on factors that affect their business success (Hanafi, 2012; Mahmood & Hanafi, 2012; Brush, Bruin, Gatewood & Henry, 2010; Ndemo & Maina, 2007). Women owned SMEs in Malaysia too face enormous pressures as the nation integrates more into the world economy. Influences, impacting as both external and internal factors, can be found in the business environment, such as globalization, technological innovation and demographic and social change, as well as the level of technology deployed, innovative ability, financial support and entrepreneurship (Mahmood & Hanafi, 2012). In order to be able to seize the opportunities that this dynamic environment opens up, women owned SMEs have to refigure their existing strategies. These firms need dynamic capabilities that enable them to sense and seize new opportunities and renew the existing market base. It is proposed that learning orientation constitutes a potential source of competitive advantage and key to success factors of women-owned SMEs.

The objective of this study, therefore, is to investigate the relationships between learning orientation, competitive advantage and business performance of women-owned SMEs in Malaysia. Specifically, this study aims to (1) determine the significant relationship between learning orientation and performance, (2) determine the significant relationship between learning orientation and competitive advantage, and (3) determine the mediating effect of competitive advantage on learning orientation-performance relationship.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Learning Orientation and Business Performance

Learning orientation (LO) is the characteristic that reflects the emphasis a firm places on understanding the relationship with its environment relative to both customers and competitors (Senge, 1990). It allows the firm to successfully exploit the opportunities and neutralizes the threats in this environment because LO enables the firm to understand the needs of customers better than its competitors (Day, 1994; Sinkula, 1994). A firm needs to learn what customers' desire or need so that it can understand what it takes to create superior value and to have competitive advantage in the market place (Hunt & Morgan, 1996; Ramaswami, Bhargava & Srivastava, 2004). This implies that a firm which focuses on understanding the customers may effectively satisfy their needs through new products and services. This should also lead to superior outcomes, and ultimately superior growth and or profitability (Slater & Naver, 1995).

Empirical evidence revealed positive relationship between learning orientation and firm performance. LO is also identified as one of the variables necessary for a firm to achieve

competitive advantage and thus a higher level of performance (Sinkula, Baker & Noordewier, 1997; Baker & Sinkula, 2000; Hurley & Hult, 1998; Day, 1994). It is often argued that learning provides the opportunity for the correct market decisions to be made that could lead to desirable business performance (Baker & Sinkula, 2000; Slater & Narver, 1999). According to Senge (1990) superior performance in the long run depends on learning excellence with a long-term systematic focus, while Liu et al., (2002) argue that LO has a positive impact to the development of new knowledge which is essential to an improved in business performance. Meanwhile Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier (1997) conclude that an increase in learning orientation results in long-term improvement in organizational performance. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: There is significant relationship between learning orientation and business performance of women-owned SMEs.

2.2 Learning Orientation and Competitive Advantage

A firm needs to learn what customer's desire or need so that it can understand what it takes to create superior value and to have a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Hunt & Morgan, 1996; Ramaswami et al, 2004). It is often argued that competitive advantage can be determined by differentiation strategies that emphasizes on customers and competitors (Day & Nedungadi, 1994). A firm that has significant competencies that are difficult for competitors to imitate would position itself to deliver superior performance (Christiansen, 1997; Ramaswami et al, 2004). This competitiveness can be further exploited and enhanced by higher order learning (Dickson, 1996; Hunt & Morgan, 1996). In addition, a positive LO that has a positive effect on market information generation and dissemination may affect which marketing strategy decisions are made (Sinkula et al, 1997), and that the LO would affect the likelihood and change in the marketing strategy. Calantone et al. (2002) agree that LO has a positive impact on innovativeness which in turn plays a critical role in the firm success in gaining sustainable competitive advantage. Hence, this leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: There is significant relationship between learning orientation and competitive advantage of women-owned SMEs.

2.3 Learning Orientation and Competitive Advantage with Business Performance

Senge (1990) suggests that learning is a natural occurrence, but it is most effective when knowledge gained from learning is systematically and thoughtfully applied. Learning organizations utilise knowledgeable, interdependent, human communication networks in order to achieve the organization's mission, goals, and objectives (Barker & Camarata, 1998). Value creation comes from learning within an organisation rather than from copying the ideas of others, and value should be the primary business objective for companies to achieve profitability (Reichheld, 1996). Learning orientation has been found to be positively associated with competitive advantage. Competitive advantage (CA) includes significant competencies in a firm that are difficult for competitors to imitate, and when properly exploited, position a firm to deliver superior performance (Porter, 1990). Christiansen (1997) posits that organizational resources and processes contribute to a supervisor competitive advantage. A firm uses its unique resources to create offerings that have superior value to customers (Ramaswami et al., 2004). CA can also influence the LO and performance relationship because knowledge of customers, competitors, channels, and suppliers is critical of the design and deployment of core customer connected process (Srivastava, Fahey & Christensen, 2001).

Martinette (2006) studied competitive advantage as a moderator of the learning orientation-performance relationship. He considers controllable market information such as

differentiated products, market sensing, and responsiveness to customers and competitors as competitive advantage on the learning orientation-performance relationship. The result, however, found that competitive advantage did not have a moderating effect on the learning orientation-performance relationship. Nevertheless, he suggests for a future research to consider the mediating effect of competitive advantage on the learning orientation and business performance relationship. His argument is based on Baron and Kenny's (1986) suggestion that certain variables may account for the relation between the predictor and the criterion in such a way as to function as a mediator to that extent. Sutcliffe and Weber (2003) also argue for the need of research on the influence of CA on the LO relationship, while Baker and Sinkula (1999) suggest that the facilitation of learning can be enhanced by the competitive advantage of the firm. The above discussions lead to the following hypothesis:

H3: Competitive advantage mediates the relationship between learning orientation and business performance of women-owned SMEs.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection Procedures

The empirical data were collected by means of a structured mail survey questionnaire. The respondents were randomly selected from a sampling frame of registered SMEs in Malaysia. The sampling frame represents a listing of all women owned SMEs and is considered representative of the industry as a whole. The principal informant was used and the owner/managers were identified as the key informants. A women business owner is defined as women owning, controlling and operating at least 51 percent of the business. Although there are limitations in the use of questionnaire based research, the benefits arising from cost savings, convenience, anonymity, and reduced interview bias seem to outweigh the limitations. A total of 1040 women owner/managers from the sampling frame were sent with the questionnaires and 165 usable responses were returned giving a response rate of 15.86 percent. Given the nature of SMEs and the low response usually associated with mail surveys, this response rate was considered reasonably adequate.

There is also an issue of non response bias which is pertinent to a survey method of data collection. Non response bias exists when there are significant differences between the answers of those who have responded and those who do not respond. This study followed the convention of comparing the respondents of the first wave with those of the second wave (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). The early wave group consisted of 90 responses whereas the final wave group consisted of 75 responses. The t-tests performed on the responses of these two groups yielded no statistically significant differences on demographic characteristics. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no significant non-response bias in this study

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Learning Orientation

The instrument that measured learning orientation was adapted from Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier (1997), and the instrument focuses on commitment to learning, shared vision/purpose, and open-minded. The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, and were coded on a scale of 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

3.2.2 Competitive Advantage

The competitive advantage construct of Ramaswami, Bhargava and Srivastava (2004) was used for this study. It was conceptualized as consisting of three dimensions, namely: differentiated products, market sensing, and market responsiveness (customers and competitors). The items of differentiated products and market sensing were measured on a

five point scale, from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The items of market responsiveness (customers and competitors) were measured on a five point scale and were coded on a scale of 5 (very good) to 1 (very poor).

3.2.3 Performance

There has been no agreement among researchers on an appropriate measure of performance. Previous studies, however, have suggested that performance measures include growth and financial performance (Wiklund, 1999). It has also been generally recognized that objective measures of performance are more appropriate than subjective evaluation of performance. However, collecting objective data is very difficult largely because owner/managers are generally unwilling to release firm's information to outsiders. In addition, they may provide biased evaluation of their firm's performance (Sapienza, Smith & Gannon, 1988). Therefore, subjective approach was adopted in this study where the performance of the firm is measured by the perception of the owner/managers providing responses to the survey. They were asked to state their firms' performance on criteria likely profitability and market share for the past three years. This variable was also gathered using 5-point Likert scale items.

4 Analysis and Findings

4.1 Reliability and Validity

The instruments in this study were developed from prior research and previously tested for reliability. Some of the questions used were slightly modified to make them more relevant to the purpose of the study. Thus, a reliability test was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the measures used. Table 1 below shows only competitive advantage achieved Cronbach Alpha value of more than 0.7 which is higher than that recommended by Nunnally (1978). However Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black (2006) consider 0.6 to below 0.7 as moderate and acceptable for use in the research. Thus, all the constructs were deemed to have adequate reliability.

Table 1

Reliability scores for variables

Variable	No. of items	Alpha value
Learning orientation	11	.653
Competitive advantage	12	.790
Performance	7	.661

The variables in this study were validated through factor analysis. Before performing the analysis, the suitability of the data was assessed through two tests; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO has to be more than at least 0.6 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity has to be significant (Kaiser, 1974). For factor analyses, principle component analysis and Varimax rotation were performed. It was suggested that items that had factor loadings lower than 0.30 should be eliminated (Hair et al., 2006).

For learning orientation, the CFA was conducted on the 11 items scale. The two statistical measures to assess the factorability were conducted through KMO which was at 0.648 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at $p < 0.001$. The factor abstracted represents a total variance of 61.14 percent. Five items did not meet the required loadings of at least 0.3 and were therefore deleted. The remaining six items were loaded on a single factor and was designated as learning orientation. For competitive advantage, CFA was

conducted on the 12 items scale. The suitability of data was also assessed. The KMO was measured at 0.764 which exceeded the recommended value of at least 0.6 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at $p < 0.001$. Only factor with loading value of 0.3 and above were considered, and therefore one item was deleted. The remaining eleven items were loaded on a single factor, and the factor abstracted represents a total variance of 60.82 percent.

Table 2

Factor analysis of LO and CA

Item	Factor loading
<i>Learning orientation</i>	
We are not afraid to reflect critically on the shared assumption we have made about our customers	.866
Employees view themselves as partners in charting the direction of the firm	.847
Managers basically agree that our firm's ability to learn is the key to our competitive advantage	.771
There is total agreement on our firm's vision across all levels and functions	.751
The basic values of this firm include learning as key to improvement	.750
We rarely collectively question our own biases the way we interpret customer information	.448
Percentage of variance explained: 61.14%	
KMO = 0.648, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Sig $p < 0.001$	
<i>Competitive Advantage</i>	
Our products are difficult for competitors to copy	.788
Our response to competitive moves in the marketplace is good	.755
Our ability to track changes in customer needs and wants is good	.752
We are quick to response to customer complaints	.709
Our collection of strategic information about customers and competitors for use with strategic planning is good	.688
Our speed of disseminating information in-house about competitors is good	.663
Our analysis of customer satisfactions with the products is good	.658
We make effort for product changes to overcome customer dissatisfaction with existing products	.647
Our products have a significant advantage over those of our competitors	.637
Our product designs are unique	.635
We are quick to response in meeting changes to customer needs and wants	.554
Percentage of variance explained: 60.82	
KMO = 0.764, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Sig $p < 0.001$	

4.2 Sample Characteristics

The profile of the respondents is illustrated in Table 3. More than 40 percent of them were below the age of 30 (44.3 percent) and 49.1 percent were married. Majority of them had achieved a first degree or higher in terms of academic qualification. Most of the respondents were in the service sector, and 60 percent of the firms also have been operating for less than 5 years.

Table 3

Profile of respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Age</i>		
Below 30	73	44.3
30 – 50	84	50.9
Above 50	8	4.8
<i>Education</i>		
Secondary	74	44.8
First Degree	80	48.5
Post Graduate	11	6.7
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Married	81	49.1
Single	84	50.9
<i>Types of industry</i>		
ICT services	45	27.3
Transportation	27	16.4
Food and beverages	63	38.2
Tourism	21	12.7
Others	9	5.5
<i>Years in operation</i>		
Below 5	100	60.6
5 - 10	41	24.8
11 – 15	5	3.0
16 – 20	12	7.3
Above 20	7	4.2

4.3 Testing of Hypotheses

Regression analysis was used to test the relationship between LO and performance (H1) and the relationship between LO and competitive advantage (H2). The regression analysis result in Table 4 indicates that LO is positively and significantly related to performance. This finding supports H1. The result in Table 5 also indicates that LO is positively and significantly related to competitive advantage and this supports H2.

Table 4

Regression of LO and Performance

	Adjusted R-Square	B	Sig
LO	.218	0.472	.000*

*Sig $p < 0.001$

Table 5

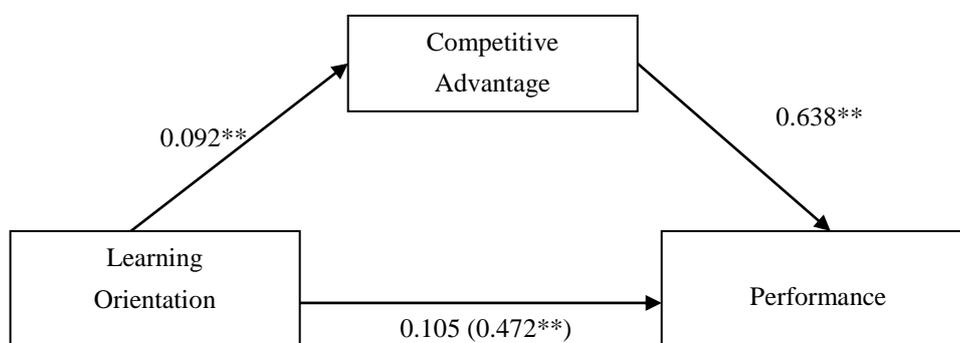
Regression of LO and Competitive advantage

	Adjusted R-Square	B	Sig
LO	.404	0.092	.000*

*Sig $p < 0.001$

The mediating effect of Competitive Advantage (CA) on the relationship between LO and performance was tested based on a regression procedure specified by Baron and Kenny (1986). According to this procedure, it must be demonstrated that LO (which is a predictor variable) is related independently to both CA (which is a mediator variable) and performance (which is the outcome variable). To prove the mediating effect, it must be demonstrated that the regression coefficient associated with the LO-performance relationship shrinks or goes to zero when CA as a mediator is added to the equation. If the effect goes to zero when the mediator is added than full mediation has taken place, however, if the effect only shrinks in the presence of the mediator, then partial mediating has occurred.

Figure 1 indicates that the conditions for mediation suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986) are met. First, a significant Path *a* was supported ($\beta = 0.092, p < 0.01$), and second the Path *b* was assessed and revealed a significant relationship ($\beta = 0.638, p < 0.01$). Finally, when Paths *a* and *b* were controlled Path *c* was assessed and revealed that the relationship was no longer significant. Therefore H3 is supported, and that CA had a full mediating effect on the relationship between learning orientation and performance of women-owned SMEs.



**Sig $p < 0.01$

Figure 1

Mediating effect of CA on LO and performance relationships

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study makes contribution to the literature by investigating and testing the relationship between LO and performance, and between LO and CA in the women-owned SMEs Malaysia. The study found that LO has a positive effect on business performance. This is also consistent with many of the previous studies (eg. Baker & Sinkula, 2000; Slater & Narver, 1999). These learned firms easily understand what their customers' desire or need, and thus create superior value and having competitive advantage in the market place. Therefore, the strategy required to further improve performance of women-owned SMEs is to identify proper and right training that could help them improve their learning orientation

skills. This study also found that LO has positive relationship with CA, and this concurs with studies by Dickson (1996) and Martinette (2006).

This research also tested the mediating effect of CA on the relationship between LO and performance. To the best of our knowledge, these efforts have not been empirically investigated even though there were numerous studies on the relationships between LO and performance, and between CA and performance. The findings indicate that mediating effect of CA on the relationship between LO and performance satisfies the conditions as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). Full mediation effect was found on this relationship. The findings of this study suggest that learning oriented SMEs which aim at sustaining their competitive advantage have to enhance their CA to improve business performance. This proves that competitive oriented culture should enhance learning behavior within the firm. In a competitive environment, CA can strengthen performance through LO. The market information obtained from customers and the competitors helps the firm to keep an eye on the market. These findings may be of help to owner/managers of SMEs to intensify initiatives to encourage better understanding on the significance of LO and CA which boosts firm's competitive position and superior performance. This helps them to constantly acquire new knowledge and skills in order for the SMEs to survive the intensively competitive market environment.

Notwithstanding, this study has several limitations that need to be addressed by future research. First, the relatively small sample size may not be representative of women-owned SMEs in Malaysia. As the response rate is low to the mail survey method employed, the generalisability of the findings is limited. Future research would benefit in the variability of methodological approach in the data collection. Second, is the study's cross-sectional design which can only provides a snapshot of one point in time. This design did not allow the determination of cause and effect or the impact of changes over time. A longitudinal investigation would allow the firms to be studied over time and provide further insights into the dynamic nature of the relationship between variables. Third, business performance in this study was measured by the subjective perceptions of respondents. Self-reported data tend to be more positive and may not always be completely truthful (Zikmund & Babin, 2007). Future research might use objective measures for firm performance to strengthen the research design. Finally, the study made use of the uni-dimensionality of the variables. Perhaps some of the variables were not meant to be unidimensional. Therefore, future studies should come out with multi-dimensional models which may provide a fuller picture and deeper understanding of those variables and their inter-relationships.

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