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Firm Drivers of Relationship Trust: The Case of Thai Service Exporters

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Abstract— ***Managers have long known that relationships are important to business. Relationship trust is widely considered a critical factor in enhancing inter-firm relationship quality and performance. However, limited research attention has been invested in determinants of inter-firm trust in the context of service. This research investigates firm factors that drive relationship trust between service exporters and their overseas customers. The study employed in-depth interviews with 10 service exporters in Thailand. Research findings indicate that international experience and resource commitment can considerably influence the level of trust in cross-border interfirm relationships between service exporters and their overseas customers. This research highlights the importance of relationship marketing and export marketing literature.***

Keywords— **exports, international business relationships, international services, international experience, resource commitment, trust**

Introduction

Competition in the global business market has strengthen, and consumer demands have become increasingly complex (Sherrell and Bejou 2007). As such, international firms especially those operating in the business-to-business (B2B) market must be able to develop and maintain close business relationships with their overseas partners (Day 2000; Zinkhan 2002). Successful relationships with foreign partners offer firms a variety of benefits, including greater operational efficiencies, reduced risks (commercial or political), gaining speed in getting products to markets, establishing long-term relationships with international suppliers (Cavusgil 1998), creating organizational learning, and knowledge transfer (Kale, Singh, and Perlmutter 2000). Cross-border inter-firm relationships require a significant commitment investment in terms of financial, technological, human resources, and time (Lee and Cavusgil 2006). Many scholars, hence, have given much attention to what factors create a successful business relationship and what determines an optimal B2B exchange (Vinh 2009).

At the same time, there has been a significant increase in the global service trade. The total value of service exports was US$ 3,780 billion in 2008, rose from US$ 1,307.1 billion in 1997 (WTO). Therefore, it implies that the role of service sector on both global and national scope has been increasingly important and presents significant research opportunities in international services marketing (Javalgi and White 2002).

Moreover, an increasing trend of global service exports, which have increased by more than 2.5 times since 1997 value of 1,307.1 billion USD (WTO) as shown in Figure 1, it is obvious that there is increasing need in studying exports in the context of services.

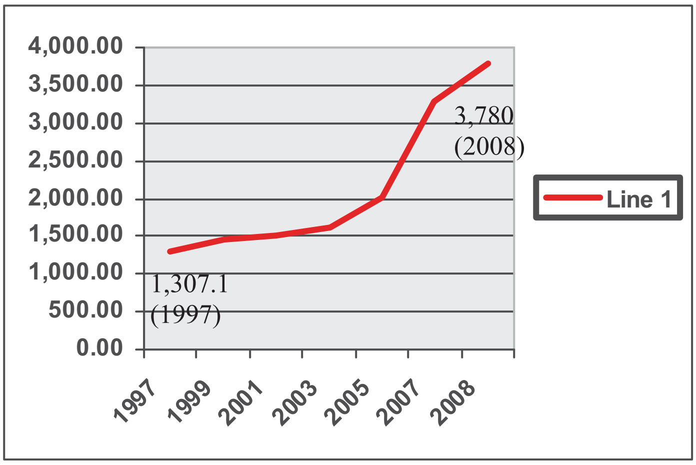

Figure 1 Service export value1997-2008 on billions USD

Source: www.wto.org

In addition, due to the fact that service exporters and traditional merchandise exporters possess different characteristics and thus they exhibit distinctively different behaviors (Andersson 2006), it has implied that the key success factors that drive service exports and merchandise exports performance are definitely different. Also, it is not only that those two types of exporters have different key success factors but the key factors driving service export performance are also different in degree from those that drive merchandise goods such as for the service business, the levels of market oriented behavior is lower (Cadogan et al. 2002), but higher in the level of export commitment and firm size (Chadee and Mattsson 1998). Additionally, while exporting research has largely focused on manufacturing firms (Anderson 1993; Gronroos 1999), very limited research attention has been given to the performance of services exporters and the associated key success drivers (Cicic, Patterson, and Shoham 2002; Javalgi and Martin 2007; La, Patterson, and Styles 2005, 2009).

Furthermore, international firms, especially those operating in the business-to-business (B2B) sector, must be able to develop and maintain close business relationships with their overseas partners (Day 2000) because successful relationships can offer firms a various benefits including enhancements in efficiency, flexibility, organizational learning, and knowledge transfer (Claro, Hagelaar & Omta 2003). However, cross-border inter-firm relationships require a substantial commitment in terms of financial, technological, time, and human resources (Lee & Cavusgil 2006). Many researchers, hence, have given much attention to what contributes to a successful business relationship and what determines an optimal B2B exchange.

In this research, trust is recognized as an important antecedent of inter-firm cooperation (Smith, Carroll & Ashford 1995). With the attempt to pursue the long-term benefits of their relationships (Ganesan 1994), international firms can cultivate and accomplish a high level of trust with their overseas partners. As a result, the firms and their business partners gain the opportunity to improve their competitiveness (Noordewier, John & Nevin 1990) and maintain their position in the global market of the twenty-first century (Zinkhan 2002). Thus, trust is widely considered a critical factor in enhancing inter-firm relationship quality and performance (Cavusgil, Deligonul & Zhang 2004; Lee & Cavusgil 2006).

Nonetheless, very limited research attention has been invested in empirically documenting the factors determining inter-firm trust (Gounaris & Venetis 2002). Also, there was no empirical study undertaken on B2B trust in the service sector between 1990 and 2003 (Seppanen et al. 2007). Moreover, there is scant research focusing the issue of how to establish and maintain long-lasting and trusting relationships in a B2B service context (Doney, Barry & Abratt 2007). This research, therefore, will advance the theory on trust by investigating the determinants of inter-firm trust in the context of service exports.

I. Research Objectives

1.2.1 This research is to explore the factors constitute a successful business relationship and the factors determine an optimal B2B exchange.

1.2.2 This research is to examine firm-specific drivers of relationship trust between service exporters and their overseas customers.

1.2.3 This research is to consider how firm's international experience has an impact on firm's resource commitment.

II. Conceptual Model and Research Propositions

According to Clark, Rajaratnam, and Smith (1996), there is no single theory that can explain the complexity and diverse nature of the international marketing of services. As a result, this research also relies on an integrated theoretical approach with the aim to gain a more comprehensive view of the research perspective. Such theories include the resource-based view of the firm and the relational exchange theory.

Resource-based view of the firm (RBV)

Resource-based view of the firm (RBV) has been employed by many scholars in various researches since the 1980s (Wernerfelt 1984). RBV focuses on how a sustainable competitive advantage is developed when a firm uses its internal resources (asset and capabilities) (Barney 1991). Such resources are seen as imperfectly mobile and heterogeneous across the firms (Hunt and Morgan 1995). Moreover, these resources should meet four characteristics which are rare, valuable, imitable, and nonsubstitutable (Barney 1991) so that a firm can develop and sustain competitive advantage. Some international services marketing research have already supported that a service provider will be successful in its exporting activities when it possesses strong internal resources and is able to utilize these resources to achieve a competitive advantage (Javalgi and Martin 2007; La, Patterson, and Styles 2005). RBV is also valuable for export marketing research since it provides a rich theoretical framework for various export models can be conceptualized and empirically tested (Dhanaraj and Beamish 2003).

Furthermore, the application of RBV has already been extended to international relationship marketing study too (La, Patterson, and Styles 2009). According to Roath and Sinkovics (2005), RBV offers a strong foundation which investments in relationship are seen to contribute to satisfying relationships, which resulting in facilitating the creation of competitive advantage (Hamel, Doz, and Prahalad 1989).

Relational exchange theory (RET)

Relational exchange theory (RET) encourages exchange partners to effectively administer their relationships by focusing on relational norms (Heide and John 1992). Relational-based governance is a useful means to moderate contract enforcement when conflict situations arise (Kaufmann and Stern 1988). Hence, relational-based or norms-based governance is an important mechanism to improve the exchange performance of inter-firm relationships (Heide and John 1990). As Berry (1995) stated, "Relationship marketing is built on the foundation of trust." So, trust is considered a critical construct in relational exchange (Wilson 1995). Trust refers to the extent to which a firm and its business customers are willing to rely on each other, and the confidence that exchange partners have for each other's reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt 1994; Zhang, Cavusgil, & Roath 2003). A trusting relationship is one in which the parties involved do not engage in opportunistic behaviour (Morgan & Hunt 1994). However, only few international relationship marketing studies employing RET over the past decade (Styles, Patterson, and Ahmed 2008). This research, therefore, adopts RET in studying since it can effectively provide "a more insightful and complete understanding of exporting" (Leonidou 2003).

So, based on the theoretical foundation explained above, as well as the exploratory case study research conducted, the researcher now develops a set of propositions which are summarized in Figure 2.

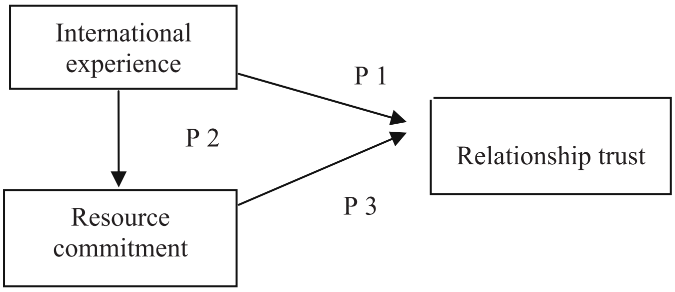

Figure 2 Proposed Conceptual Framework

P 1 Service exporters' international experience is positively associated with relationship trust.
P 2 Service exporters' international experience is positively associated with their resource commitment.
P 3 Service exporters' resource commitment is positively associated with relationship trust.

III. Method

The study was undertaken on firms that operate in the B2B service sector in Thailand since the service sector is increasingly important for the country as the total value of $US 28.8 billion in 2007, rose from $US 17.6 billion in 2003 (SERVICETHAITRADE), ranking at the twenty-seventh of the world's top service exporters in 2007 (see table 2) (WTO). Moreover, the majority of research on relationship marketing is based on data collected in North America or Europe (Pisharodi, Angur, and Shainesh 2003). A study of Thai service exporters, hence, is deemed appropriate.

Table 1 World's top service exporters in 2007

Country	World Rank	Value $US billion	Annual percentage change
United States	1	456.4	15
United Kingdom	2	273.0	18
Germany	3	205.8	15
France	4	136.7	16
Spain	5	128.3	21
Japan	6	127.1	10
Thailand	**27**	**28.8**	**17**

Source: www.wto.org

The study employed qualitative research method since it can offer rich data and insights into the behavior of service exporters. Moreover, qualitative research method can provide researchers with some preliminary information on building conceptual models (Hair, Bush, and Ortinau 2000). This was important for this study as the researcher had the opportunity to verify and refine constructs to be used in the model. The chosen qualitative research method was in-depth interviews.

In-depth interviews are defined by Kinnear et al. (1993, p.240) as an "unstructured personal interview, which uses extensive probing to get a single partner respondent to talk freely and to express detailed beliefs and feelings on a topic." During the interviews, the researcher could use probing questions, a unique characteristic of this data collection method (Hair, Bush, and Ortinau 2000), as a mechanism to obtain more information on the interviewees' thoughts.

Ten service firms representing a wide range of industries were invited to participate in the study (Table 3). These firms were randomly selected from the Directory of Thai Exporters published by the Department of Export of Thailand 2009 version. The interviewees were business executives who were knowledgeable of the international marketing activities of the service firms. These executives were the key informants for this exploratory study.

Table 2 Characteristics of interviewees

Interview #	Position	Industry
M#1	Export Manager	Computer and Information Services
M#2	Manager, Business Development	Communication Services
M#3	Managing Director	Management Consulting Services
M#4	Executive Director	Financial and Insurance Services
M#5	Chief Executive Officer	Training Services
M#6	Territory Manager	Logistics Services
M#7	Chief Executive Officer	Legal Services
M#8	General Manager	Communication Services
M#9	Export Development Executive	Computer and Information Services
M#10	Business Strategist	Management Consulting Services

Furthermore, according to the four modes of international service delivery categorized by the General Agreements on Trade in Services (GATS), this study selected only the firms that directly provide business services national borders to overseas client which means only the businesses in the modes of cross-border supply, commercial presence, and presence of natural persons will be included in this study. The unit of analysis of the study was a firm's level.

IV. Results and discussion of results

From the in-depth interviews, trust is one of the most common and historical variables in the literature (Morgan and Hunt 1994, Parkhe 1998) and is a critical construct in relational exchange (Wilson 1995). Consistent with Zhang, Cavusgil, and Roath (2003), the interviewees referred to trust as the extent to which they and their business clients are willing to rely on each other, and the confidence that exchange partners have for each other's reliability and integrity. For example, M#6 claimed, "we trust them from the perspective that they're making the right choices."

More specifically, trust reflects the belief of a firm that its requirements will be fulfilled by its business partner (Barney and Hansen 1994). Additionally, trust also evolves overtime and enables the firms to establish a fruitful relationship (Zaheer, McEvily, and Perrone 1998). Therefore, inter-firm relationships based on trust enjoy stability and longevity. This received support from M#2,

"I think that a significant investment is required in those early stages to build trust in this relationship… There's a huge amount of trust on what happens on both… when the services are delivered and the payment terms happen. Once you've been three or four years maybe doing that relationship, you know, there's an underlying trust that exists really without having to do a lot of work on the relationship."

As such, the qualitative findings confirm the literature that trust enables the firms to overcome different psychological, attitudinal, and other barriers in the foreign business market (Leonidou, Talias, and Leonidou 2008).

Furthermore, the executives who participated in this qualitative study discussed the two firms' characteristics–resource commitment and international experience–that play an important role in building trust between a firm and its business clients.

From the in-depth interviews, active exporters commit more resources to their export business (Leonidou, Katsikeas, and Hadjimarcou 2002). In agreement with Cort, Griffith, and White (2007), the executives stated that "obviously you need to commit some serious financial investment" (M#1). Also, service firms identified skilled personnel and staff training as key, reinforcing Contractor and Mudambi's (2008) findings on the importance of human capital investment. M#7 strongly emphasized the commitment of personal resource,

"It's a people business, so it's mostly about human resources. And I would say to you our biggest issue right now is getting enough people to service the demands of the market and it's a constant problem…. And of course if you haven't got the people and the skills and the knowledge, then you can't effectively service the market."

In addition, a significant commitment of resources enables the firms to better satisfy the needs of foreign clients, according to M#8, who said "our company has definitely invested a lot into this venture, from financial investment to human resources' expertise." Thus, a sufficient allocation and commitment of resources enables the firm to overcome barriers that would otherwise restrain its foreign market involvement (Bello and Gilliland 1997), and improve cross-border business relationships.

Moreover, prior international experience also plays an important role in the export activities of the firms (Cavusgil and Zou 1994). M#8 explained,

"It took us a long time to understand the business practices and have a good understanding of the business market over there… Understanding the domestic market is a must if you'd like to succeed."

In addition, export experience contributes to making exporting firms more market-oriented in their operations in overseas market (Cadogan et al. 2006), achieving better business relationships (Leonidou, Katsikeas, and Hadjimarcou 2002). Importantly, once the firm knows its markets well, it can make better prediction and judgement about customer responses to its marketing decisions (Cadogan, Diamantopoulos, and Siguaw 2002). Equipped with international experience, firms learn "the approach to deal with people and words people use, and how to do some good negotiations" (M#5).As such, export experience not only facilitates firms' export performance but also the management of the B2B relationships of the service exporters.

V. Conclusions, Contributions and Directions for Future Research

Conclusions

This study developed a model linking firm factors with relationship trust in an international service business relationship. It did so with in-depth interview with 10 managers from Thai service export companies. The finding is that trust is related to firm factors (international experience and resource commitment).

From a relational exchange theory perspective, there was a significant support for important role that firm factors play on relational variable of trust. International experience plays a direct role in building trust between firms and their overseas clients, and also has a direct impact on a firm's resource commitment. Resource commitment by the exporting firm also has a direct impact on relationship trust.

Implications for scholar

This research enriches the international services marketing literature since it will provide the perspective of service providers in the context of international services as recommended by Lancastre and Lages (2006). Furthermore, this research answers Doney and Cannon's (1997) call for research that considers broader perspectives of determinants of trust.

Implications for management

This study provides service export providers with more understanding of how firm factors affecting inter-firm relationship trust which in turn has a positive impact on firm's export performance. Moreover, this research increases awareness among service exporters to highly commit themselves to the establishment and development of relationships with their business counterparts through the use of firm's internal resources. Finally, this research draws higher attention from service exporters in creating relationship trust as firms' competitive advantages.

Directions for future research

This study considered only two firm factors as determinants of trust. Future research should also investigate several other firm characteristics such as management commitment, brand equity, customer orientation, as well as home and host market drivers as potential drivers of relationship trust. Additionally, future research should empirically test this model in order to confirm the validity of the model in this study. Finally, it would be valuable to replicate or refute the results of this study in other cross-border relational contexts.

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