**THE MODERATING ROLE OF CULTURE ON THE PERFORMANCE EFFECT OF ENTREPRENEURIAL ORIENTATION IN MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRACT**

Prior research suggests that entrepreneurial orientation of firms is a key ingredient for organizational success. However, in this era of rapid globalization, national culture could be the distinguishing forces that can significantly affect the performance of both national and international organizations. The purpose of this paper is to propose a framework to assess the entrepreneurial orientation to firm performance relationship and the potential influence of culture. Therefore, national culture can be examined as a potential moderator of the entrepreneurial orientation to performance relationship. This moderating variable may explain some of the discrepancies in the direct performance effects of entrepreneurial orientation in international context. Specifically, this paper attempts to describe what is the state of entrepreneurial orientation in Malaysia; does entrepreneurial orientation influence the business performance of firms in Malaysia; and, to what extent does national culture moderate the effects of entrepreneurial orientations on the business performance of firms in Malaysia. A framework positing an association between the degree of entrepreneurial orientation and performance and an association between national culture and the degree of entrepreneurial orientation is proposed.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship; Entrepreneurial Orientation; National Culture; Performance

**Introduction**

Entrepreneurship has long been viewed as an engine that drives innovation and promotes economic development (Kuratko and Hodgetts, 2004). In today's intensifying global competition, increasing interdependence, rapid technology development, unstable environments, and many other factors have highlighted the need for organizations to become more entrepreneurial in order to survive and prosper (Dess, Lumpkin, and McGee 1999). Many observers believe that an organization's survival and success require continuous organizational renewal, innovation, and risk-taking, which in turn require the conceptualization and pursuit of new opportunities (Miller, 1983).

Terms such as "corporate entrepreneurship" (the sum of a company's innovation, renewal, and venturing efforts) (Zahra & Covin, 1995; Dess, Lumpkin, & McGee 1999), "entrepreneurship" (what business shall the organization enter?) (Miles & Snow 1978), "entrepreneurial orientation" (the processes that managers use in determining how a new business is undertaken) (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996) have been widely used in entrepreneurship literature. It is the latter term, "entrepreneurial orientation," that is adopted in the context of this study.

Researchers make studies on entrepreneurial orientation on a basis of multiple dimensions, which mainly include innovativeness, risk-taking, and proactiveness (e.g., Covin & Slevin, 1986; Dess & Lumpkin 2005; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Entrepreneurial orientation refers to the organizational processes, methods, styles, practices, and decision-making activities employed by entrepreneurs that lead to new entry (Covin, Green & Slevin, 2006; Dess & Lumpkin, 2005; Lumpkin & Dess 1996, 2001; Stevenson & Jarillo 1990; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005). More specifically, entrepreneurial oriented firms in Malaysia will track and respond to changes in their environments through innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. The firm's degree of entrepreneurial orientation will depend on the extent to which they innovate, act proactively, and take risks. Therefore, an organization with an entrepreneurial orientation could, thus, be defined as an entrepreneurial organization (Covin & Slevin, 1990).

Researchers have demonstrated that EO dimensions increase an organization's flexibility and adaptability to changing environmental conditions, which are key elements in the organization's performance (e.g., Covin & Slevin, 1991; Lumpkin & Dess 1996; Zahra & Covin, 1995). Hence, it is the underlying assumption of this preliminary study that innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking dimensions constitute the core entrepreneurial orientation in firms as well, but, the positive entrepreneurship-performance linkage may not be monotonic across different environments or contexts.

We have only a limited understanding of why rates of entrepreneurship vary cross-nationally (Oswald, 2008). Essentially, scholars have a limited understanding about why entrepreneurial oriented firms are more successful in one country than in another (Shane, 1992). Anomalous evidence has accumulated regarding the direct and indirect influence of EO on performance. Interestingly, most of the inconsistent findings have emerged in non-U.S. contexts that have distinctive cultures and economic infrastructures. This inconsistency implies that underlying forces of culture may have masked the direct performance effects of EO in other cultures. In other words, national culture may moderate the influence of entrepreneurial orientation on performance.

The influence of national culture in an organization surfaces through key managers who tend to see themselves, and are perceived by others, as champions of the national culture they represent (Bloodgood, Sapienza, & Almeida 1996). Such roles played by key executives are further evident from the assertion that organizations are reflections of the values and beliefs of powerful actors (Hambrick & Mason 1984). These key organizational leaders perceive organizational practices through the lens of their national cultural orientation (Schein, 1996). More specifically, they are likely to have all-out faith, motivation, and commitment toward an organizational practice given that it fits with the underlying values of their national culture (Amabile et al., 1996). In contrast, any incongruity between the inherent values of the national culture and an organizational practice will weaken the organization leaders' faith in that organizational practice. In essence, key decision-makers' national cultural orientations may enhance or diminish the impact of organizational practices on organizational performance (Ralston et al. 1995). This contention is theoretically supported by the practice-culture fit paradigm (Schoonhoven, 1981; Newman & Nollen 1996) which purports that certain cultural profiles correspond with certain organizational practices. That is, the performance effects of certain management practices are dependent on the co-alignment between the practices and the culture (Roth, 1995).

Thus, in today's extraordinarily competitive and unstable environment, organizations' success, including that of banks, requires purposeful adaptation and accommodation to their national culture – environmental factor. To what extent this factor can moderate the relationships between the entrepreneurial orientation and performance in a non-Western setting has yet to be examined. This study will examine the moderating role of national culture on entrepreneurial orientation’s effects on banks' performance in non-Western business environment.

Therefore, it is the main interest of this study to investigate the relationship between EO and firm’s performance. Specifically, this article attempts to contribute to the literature by addressing the following research questions:- (1) what is the state of EO in Malaysia; (2) to what extent do top management, organizational, and structural factors influence the EO; and (3) do entrepreneurial orientation influence the performance of firms in Malaysia. (4) to what extent does national culture moderate the effects of entrepreneurial orientations on the performance of banks in Malaysia. To accomplish these objectives, the study draws from:

1. The evolving entrepreneurial orientation theory from marketing and strategic management literature (Morris and Paul 1987; Covin & Slevin, 1989; Miles & Arnold, 1991)
2. The national culture theory from sociology, management, and marketing literature (Almond & Powell, 1968; Hofstede, 1980; Narvar & Slater, 1990).

**Significance of the Propose Research Framework**

This study is of potential value to both theory and practice of marketing and entrepreneurship. It is capable of examining fundamental issues such as entrepreneurial orientation, and the moderating roles of national culture on the performance effects of the EO. While entrepreneurial orientation and their antecedents and consequences have been investigated within industrialized Western business environments, their applicability and generalizability in a non-Western context have not been well researched. Despite calls in the literature, unfortunately, no study has yet investigated the potential moderating effects of national culture on the performance influence of entrepreneurial orientation empirically. The propose framework attempts to fill the aforementioned gaps in the literature. Furthermore, since the majority of existing studies have concentrated on the manufacturing sector, this proposed framework extends the existing research on EO to a service industry, namely, banks in Malaysia. Also, this may provide basic data for future studies and stimulate further research on how to advance EO in developing countries. Finally, this study also may be of value to multinational corporations who have to deal with different cultures.

**Literature Review**

**Entrepreneurial Orientation**

The entrepreneurial orientation concept, as applied to a firm, has its origins in the strategy literature (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). For example, in 1973, Mintzberg posited three types of strategy making: entrepreneurial, planning, and adaptive. Miller (1983) appears to offer the earliest operationalisation of the entrepreneurial orientation concept. Miller clarifies the construct of entrepreneurial orientation when he defines an entrepreneurial firm as one that “engages in product marketing innovation, undertakes somewhat risky ventures, and is first to come up with proactive innovations, beating competitors to the punch.” (Miller, 1983) From a marketing perspective, Morris and Paul (1987) define entrepreneurial orientation as a propensity of a company’s top management to take calculated risks, to be innovative, and to demonstrate proactiveness. Webster (1981) viewed entrepreneurial orientation as an essentially more proactive marketing orientation. Morris and Paul (1987) perceive marketing as a means of achieving corporate entrepreneurship. Slater and Narver (1994) viewed entrepreneurial orientation as complementary to marketing orientation, where a firm needs both in order to achieve maximum effectiveness.

Entrepreneurial orientation is a firm level construct (Covin & Slevin, 1991) that is closely linked to strategic management and the strategic decision making process (Burgelman, 1983; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Naman & Slevin, 1993). The constructs of entrepreneurial orientation have been introduced by Lumpkin and Dess, who define a firm’s entrepreneurial orientation as “its propensity to act autonomously, innovate, take risks, and act proactively when confronted with market opportunities” (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). They further explain that “entrepreneurial orientation is a process construct and concerns the methods, practices, and decision making styles managers use” (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Entrepreneurial orientation is grounded in the strategic choice perspective and concerns the “intentions and actions of key players functioning in a dynamic generative process” (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). An entrepreneurial orientation promotes initiative (Burgelman, 1983) and “dispersed” entrepreneurship, which is the involvement of multiple management levels in the formation and implementation of entrepreneurial strategies. From a management perspective, Stevenson and Jarillo (1990) stress the necessity of utilising the concept of entrepreneurial orientation by claiming that “an entrepreneurial orientation is not only created or imposed by top management, but also reflects the strategic posture as exhibited by multiple layers of management” (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990).

Entrepreneurial orientation is conceptualised as having anywhere from three to five dimensions, which may vary independently (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). However, in the previous EO research, researchers have been focusing on the most commonly cited entrepreneurial orientation dimensions: innovativeness, risk taking, and proactiveness (Richard & Barnett, 2004).

With this principle of entrepreneurial orientation defined, quite a number of EO definitions were put forth and empirical research was carried out based on this EO definition. For example, Wiklund (1999) defines the construct of EO as “the CEO’s strategic orientation reflecting the willingness of a firm to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour”. So, as Wiklund and Shepherd (2003) discussed in their EO research, EO refers to a firm’s strategic orientation, capturing specific entrepreneurial aspects of decision-making styles, methods, and practices. As such, it reflects how a firm operates (Wiklund& Shepherd, 2003). Deriving their work from the principle of entrepreneurial orientation, Aloulou and Fayolle’s (2005) definition of EO refers to a firm’s strategic orientation, capturing specific entrepreneurial aspects of decision-making styles, methods, and practices. Following this principle, Kreiser, Marino, and Weaver (2003) assess the psychometric properties of the entrepreneurial orientation scale in a multiple country analysis. And Richard and Barnett (2004) conducted a study on cultural diversity in management, firm performance, and the moderating role of entrepreneurial orientation dimensions (Richard & Barnett, 2004).

Lumpkin and Dess (1996) examine the EO-performance relationship by providing an integrative framework for analysis. The integrative framework for analyzing the EO-performance relationship that Lumpkin & Dess (1996) identifies key contingency variables that impact the EO-performance relationship. The contingencies that Lumpkin & Dess (1996) identify are grouped as either environmental factors or organizational factors. The identification of organizational and environmental factors influencing the EO-performance relationship is consistent with Miller & Friesen (1978) and Miller (1983) who identified variables that relate to environment and organization as impacting EO.

**National Culture**

National culture describes the common values and conventions from which stem the patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting in a society (e.g., Asma,1996). Dawar and Parker (1994) identify four approaches that have been used in the marketing literature to identify and measure cultures. These approaches include nationality, ethno-geographic trade areas, national characteristic, and Hofstede's study of cultures.

Culture is the system of collective values that distinguishes the members of one group from another (Hofstede, 1980; Mueller & Thomas, 2000). Hofstede (1980) defines national culture as “collective programming” of the mind that gives distinction among nations. Based on his study of 116,000 employees of IBM throughout the world, Hofstede (2001) describes national culture as consisting of four basic dimensions. Hence, Kirkman *et al*. (2006) suggest that the most commonly employed measures of national culture was developed by Hofstede (1980), who utilized statistical analysis and theoretical reasoning to isolate four basic cultural dimensions: uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, and power distance.

*Uncertainty avoidance* centers on how societies deal with unknown aspects of the future and the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations (Hofstede, 1980). Societies high in this dimension are anxious over the future and actively avoid risk by devising various means of control include religion, laws, social plans, and written and unwritten rules. In contrast, societies that feel secure about their future have low uncertainty avoidance.

*Individualism* refers to the relationship between the individual and the collectivity that prevails in a given society. Societies high in individualism have loose ties, and everyone is expected to look after his/her own personal interests. Low individualism or collectivist societies have close ties among members, hold group values and beliefs, and seek collective interests (Hofstede, 1980).

*Masculinity* refers to the degree to which a society is characterized by assertiveness (masculinity) versus nurturance (femininity). More masculine societies place greater achievement, tasks, performance, and purposefulness, whereas feminine societies emphasize people relationships, the quality of life, helping others, and not drawing attention to oneself (Hofstede, 1980).

*Power distance* is the extent to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power be distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1997). Societies high in power distance accept power and wealth differences more readily than societies low in power distance, which value equality of classes and people.

This study will specify national culture as a contingent variable for the performance effects of market and entrepreneurial orientations of organizations. The theoretical insight for this contention is rooted in the managerial practice-culture congruity, or fit paradigm (e.g., Hofstede, 1991; Naman & Slevin 1993; Newman & Nollen 1996; Hayton, George & Zahra, 2002), which suggests that managerial practices such as entrepreneurship should be aligned with national cultural demands to promote desired organizational outcomes. In other words, cultural differences may enhance or diminish the impact of managerial practices such as entrepreneurship, as it bears on organizational outcomes (Hofstede, 1991; Robinson, et al. 1991; Rajeep & Tansuhaj, 2001). Here, the contingency mechanism arises from the concept of value congruence. That is, the practice-culture fit is evaluated based on the degree to which national cultures and managerial practices – entrepreneurial orientation, is similar on underlying dimensions.

**Conceptual Framework and Hypothesized Propositions**

Based on the review of literature, we propose a research model. The model in Figure 1 illustrated that entrepreneurial orientation influence the performance of firms. In addition, the model proposed that a moderating variable – national culture (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity), had significant effects on the performance effects of the entrepreneurial orientation of firms in Malaysia.

**Entrepreneurial Orientation**

* Innovativeness
* Proactiveness
* Risk-taking

**Business Performance**

P.1

D.V

I.V

**National Culture**

* Power Distance
* Uncertainty Avoidance
* Individualism
* Masculinity

P2a

P2b

P2c

P2d

**Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of Performance Effect of EO (Contingency)**

To this basic framework, we proposed the following propositions about EO-performance.

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| **1. Consequences of Entrepreneurial Orientation (Concept)***Proposition 1: the greater the degree of firms’ entrepreneurial orientation, the higher the business performance of firms.* |
| **2. Moderating Roles of National Culture on the Performance Effect of EO (Concept)** |
| **Power Distance (Dimension)***Proposition 2a: entrepreneurial orientation will have a stronger relationship with performance in firms that have lower power distance than firms that have higher power distance.* |
| **Uncertainty Avoidance (Dimension)***Proposition 2b: entrepreneurial orientation will have a stronger relationship with performance in firms that have lower uncertainty avoidance than firms that have higher uncertainty avoidance.* |
| **Individualism (Dimension)***Proposition 2c: entrepreneurial orientation will have a stronger relationship with performance in firms that have lower individualism than with firms with higher individualism.* |
| **Masculinity (Dimension)***Proposition 2d: entrepreneurial orientation will have a stronger relationship with performance in firms that have lower masculinity than with firms with higher masculinity.* |

**Conclusion and Direction of Research**

Dess and Lumpkin (2005) have requested researchers “to consider what factors increase or diminish the EO-firm performance relationship.” In their seminal paper, Shane and Venkataraman (2000) posed the questions:

1. “Why some people, and not others, discover” entrepreneurial opportunities?
2. Why some people, and not others “exploit these opportunities”.

The review of the literature points out that an EO firm not only needs employees perceiving opportunities, but needs as well employees actually behaving entrepreneurial upon the discovery of such an opportunity. Consequently, an EO firm needs people who execute, that are people who are not only capable of perceiving opportunities but who strive to exploit opportunities.

In addition, the theory behind entrepreneurial orientation is applicable not only to firm behaviour, but also to the process of entrepreneurial development at the societal level of countries. Whether or not certain societies actually experience an abundance of entrepreneurship does not depend solely on their cultural foundations. Rather, entrepreneurship depends upon the unique blend of cultural factors and country’s institutional profile that together combine to foster (or not) a strong entrepreneurial orientation.Therefore, this article sets the stage for the decision-makers in developing countries like Malaysia in searching for answers to questions such as:(1) If EO plays pivotal roles in the achievement of superior business performance, then what are the factors that drive or hinder entrepreneurial-oriented activities?; (2) Can organizations operating in developing countries achieve superior performance by implementing the EO like their counterparts in the United States and other developed countries? And; (3) What are the moderating roles of national culture on the impact of EO on business performance?

Without answering these questions, managers in developing countries such as Malaysia cannot initiate organizational change processes directed at building entrepreneurial orientation in enhancing performance. Empirical research along this line would give us a more comprehensive picture of entrepreneurial orientation-performance relationship and allow a more detailed insight on the role of national culture on the effect of EO-performance relationship.

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