

Strategic Orientation(s) Construct: Review and Consolidation

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nature and types of the strategic orientation (SO) constructs and its impact on firms' performance. Orientations have been studied in various disciplines, viz., Entrepreneurship, Human Resource, International Business, Marketing, and Strategy. But due to difference in the units of analysis across these disciplines there is no uniformity on the nomenclature, the number and types of dimensions, the interrelationships among these orientations, and the mechanisms through which these orientations affect firm performance. Some researchers recommend that simultaneous deployment of multiple orientations is better for firm, an objective made difficult to achieve by the lack of a unifying strategic orientation model and corresponding clarity on linkages among the constituents of various strategic orientations and firm performance. This paper uses literature survey to create a parsimonious unifying model of select major firm strategic orientations and their association with firm performance.

Key Words: Strategic Orientation, Entrepreneurship, Strategy.

1. Introduction

Strategic orientation (SO) is a hotly researched topic among business scholars. The research points to as many orientations as the disciplines, viz., customer orientation, employee orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, export orientation, international orientation, learning orientation, market orientation, marketing orientation, product orientation, production orientation, selling orientation, and technology orientation (Cano et al., 2004; Covin et al., 2006; Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997; Grinstein, 2008; Hakala, 2010; Hult et al., 2004; Kirca et al., 2005; Shoham et al., 2005; Sinkula et al., 1997; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005). While some orientation-performance studies have focused on one orientation (Cano et al., 2004), others have used multiple orientations (Baker & Sinkula, 1999; Gatignon & Xuereb., 1997; Miles & Arnold, 1991). Similarly, while some have only studied universal relationships, others have studied contingency and configurational relationships along with moderators and/or mediator variables (Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005). Some scholars have also opined that understanding of the interrelationships among various orientations, and appropriate orientation(s) combination may enhance organizational performance (Grinstein, 2008; Li et al., 2008).

Some studies in the orientation literature have linked orientation to the study of culture- which is deeply embedded. Others have dealt with it at more operational

level; say as dynamic capability, allowing managers say in specifying orientation of a given firm at a given point of time to suit the organizational purpose and achieve fit with the environment. Given the analogy between the nature of orientation of an individual and that of a firm and how it can facilitate the prediction of behavior, it lights hope of being link between the micro (individual, group or department level) and the macro (organization-wide) aspects of a firm. This study thus has following research objectives, viz., to understand key orientation constructs and the factors underlying these orientations, and to explore the inter linkages among these orientations and the firm performance. To achieve this objective this paper aims at creating a unifying model of SOs which will facilitate identification of various factors of each SO and how these factors correlate with each other and firm performance.

Towards the end, a selective-intensive literature review of articles in undertaken that are published in reputed journals, listed in table 1, combed through keyword(s) search viz., EO, LO, MO, TO, and its various combinations, and performance/ innovation, in the abstract field of EBSCO database. The remaining draft of the paper is organized as follows: first literature review introducing the key strategic orientations along with their key constituent factors are reported. This is followed by sections on the interrelation among these key orientation constructs, discussion on proposed unified model, future research, and conclusion.

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Table 1: Key Literature/ Anchors

S. No	Orientation(s)	Select Contributor
1	SO	Deshpande, 1999; Escriba-Estevé et al., 2008; Gao et al., 2007; Noble et al., 2002; Venkatraman, 1989; Zhou et al., 2005.
2	EO	Covin et al., 2006; Rauch et al., 2009; Walter et al., 2005; Wiklund et al., 2005
3	LO	Calantone et al., 2002; Sadler-Smith et al., 2001; Sinkula et al., 1997
4	MO	Atuahene-Gima, 1995; Cano et al., 2004; Shoham et al., 2005; Zhou et al., 2005
5	TO	Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997; Hult et al., 2004
6	MO-TO	Atuahene-Gima, 1996; Mu & Benedetto, 2011; Gao et al., 2007; Spanjol et al., 2011
7	MO- EO	Acosta et al., 2018, Atuahene-Gima & Ko, 2001, Colton et al., 2010; Li et al., 2008; Miles & Arnold, 1991; Rodríguez Gutiérrez et al., 2014.
8	MO-LO	Baker & Sinkula, 1999; Luo et al., 2005; Rodríguez Gutiérrez et al., 2014; Slater and Narver, 1995;
9	EO-LO	Kearney et al., 2018; Real et al., 2014; Rodríguez Gutiérrez et al., 2014; Wang 2008
10	Multiple	Grinstein, 2008; Hakala, 2010; Liu et al. 2002; Noble et al. 2002; Zhou et al., 2005

2. Literature Review

Strategic Orientation

Orientation, as per the internet dictionary sources, has various meanings- an integrated set of attitudes and beliefs; or a predisposition in favor of something etc. The literature is replete with notions about orientation. In the strategic management discipline, some of the earliest academic attempts at studying orientation were made by Robinson and Pearce (1988), and Venkatraman (1989). Since then evolving independently across several disciplines, the orientation(s) construct came to be seen equally varied ranging from the philosophy of conducting business (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997) to a deeply embedded characteristic- strategic fit, predisposition, and thrust- of an organization's culture (Noble et al., 2002) to the dynamic capability (Zhou et al., 2005) to a more visible/ operational adaptive mechanism or manifestation of culture (Braunscheidel and Suresh, 2009). Gatignon and Xuereb (1997), e.g., view SO as principles that determine the long-term, resource-intensive, mostly irreversible decisions/ activities of a firm. Whereas, Deshpande et al., (1989: 4) define organizational culture as "the pattern of shared values and beliefs that help individuals understand organizational functioning and thus provide them norms for behavior in the organization". When SO and culture are defined in these ways, these concepts appear to be highly overlapping. Noble et al., (2002) summarized various perspectives employed in studying SO into four categories- narrative approaches, classificatory approaches, comparative approaches, and competitive culture. Following the suggestion of Noble et

al., (2002) and following the research traditions of Baker and Sinkula (1999), Gatignon and Xuereb, (1997), Hakala (2010), Miles and Arnold, (1991) this paper focuses in four key firm-level strategic orientations, viz., entrepreneurial orientation (EO), learning orientation (LO), marketing orientation (MO), and technological orientation (TO).

Entrepreneurial orientation

EO refers to "the processes, practices, and decision making activities towards new entry" (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996: 136). Covin and Selvin (1989) specify following dimensions of EO- competitive aggressiveness, innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, and a need for autonomy. Competitive aggressiveness refers to "a firm's propensity to challenge its competitors to achieve entry or improve position in the marketplace" (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996: 148). It is reflected in firms' proclivity to beat the competition through product war, price war, sales promotion war, and advertising war (Hughes and Morgan, 2007). Lumpkin and Dess, (1996: 142) defines innovativeness as "a firm's tendency to engage in and support new ideas, novelty, experimentation, and creative processes that may result in new products, services, or technological processes". It is primarily reflected in the emphasis bestowed on achieving leadership in technology driven research & development, and new product innovation (Wang, 2008 and Zhou et al. 2005). Proactiveness refers to "seeking new opportunities which may or may not be related to the present line of operations, introduction of new products and brands ahead of competition, strategically eliminating operations

which are in the mature or declining stages of life cycle" (Venkatraman, 1989: 949). It reflects in the firm being the first one to stir the market equilibrium, be it new inputs, processes, and channels (Covin & Selvin, 1989). Firm risk taking refers to "the degree to which managers are willing to make large and risky resource commitments—i.e., those which have a reasonable chance of costly failures" (Miller & Friesen, 1978: 923). It is reflected in firms' belief that bold acts are necessary to achieve competitively superior performance (Covin & Selvin, 1989). Autonomy refers to "independent action directed at bringing about a new venture" (Balodi, 2014: 190). It is reflected in the freedom and independence/ authority granted to employees while thinking and performing the tasks. In recent researches, EO is shown to affect firm performance indirectly through LO and market-oriented behaviours (Wang, 2008) as explored in later sections.

Learning orientation

Learning involves creation and utilization of new knowledge resulting in improved behaviours or value creation. Learning orientation (LO) is thus an indicator of organization's proclivity to create knowledge, share it, and then use it (Sinkula et al. 1997). The LO view suggests that learning facilitates exploitation of opportunities via actions leading to superior performance. Researchers have proposed commitment to learn, intra-organizational knowledge sharing, open mindedness, and shared vision as the dimensions of LO (Calantone et al. 2002; Sinkula et al. 1997). Commitment to learning is an indicator of emphasis over learning in the firm (Sackmann, 1991). It is reflected in acknowledgement of learning as a core belief of the firm, as an investment for the achievement of sustainable competitive advantage (Wang, 2008). Intra-organizational knowledge sharing is demonstrated via continual analysis of all organizational actions and communication of the lessons learned through appropriate and well-defined mechanisms (Wang, 2008). Open-mindedness reflects proactive, unabated, and fearless introspection of organizational assumptions, values, and processes (Wang, 2008). It is reflected in boldness displayed in questioning shared assumptions, values, and processes critically and persistently. Shared vision refers to whether a firm has a unified, coherent, agreed-upon sense of direction or focus (Day, 1994). It is reflected in commonality, agreement, and commitment of organizational purpose across all organizational levels and verticals (Wang, 2008). LO may facilitate both adaptive and generative learning. According to Slater and Narver, (1995), Adaptive learning remains within a predetermined mental frame i.e., a set of organizational constraints that are taken for granted, and includes sequential and incremental learning. Generative learning is frame-breaking learning by questioning old assumptions and constraints about all that the firm

assumes and understands. Some researchers have posited the LO encompasses the market and technology orientations (Calantone et al. 2002).

Market orientation

As per Noble et al., (2002) (as discussed by Shoham et al., 2005) there are two main approaches to conceptualization of MO. In the first approach, MO refers to the creation, dissemination and utilization of customers and market-related information (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). This process-driven approach measures MO by evaluating the gathering and exploitation of market information towards strategy formulation and implementation. The first dimension, collection and usage of information- is reflected in firm's emphasis on collecting quantitative and qualitative data on customers through various touch points; use of this information to improve or curate more appropriate value proposition for precisely segmented markets. A market-oriented strategy would be evident when the firm values market position more than financial performance; firm focuses on markets where it is strong, and on market rather than products while planning. A finer implementation of market-oriented strategy is ensured by taking all operational decisions- pricing and credit policies, delivery schedules and standards- based on customer needs.

On the other hand, Narver and Slater (1990: 21) define MO as an "organizational culture that most effectively and efficiently creates the necessary behaviours for the creation of superior value for buyers and thus continued superior performance for the business". This approach views MO as consisting of customer orientation, competitor orientation, inter-functional coordination, a long-term focus and a profit focus. Gatignon and Xuereb (1997: 78) define customer orientation as "the ability and the will to identify, analyze, understand, and answer user needs". It is reflected in firm's commitment to serve customer needs by providing superior value to the consumers. Gatignon and Xuereb (1997; 78) define competitor orientation as "the ability and the will to identify, analyze, and respond to competitors' actions". It is reflected in regularly collecting and analysing competitors' information, and responding rapidly to competitors moves. Inter-functional coordination in a firm is an indicator of level of coordination, communication, and control in a firm. It is reflected in inter-functional coordination mechanism including teams, calls, sharing of resources, transfer/ deputation of personnel, cross-functional training.

Technology orientation

Technology orientation (TO) is defined as "the ability and will to acquire a substantial technological background and use it in the development of new products"(Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997: 78). TO assumes that consumers want value proposition that has technological superiority at its

core (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997). TO is thus evident in the actions and strategies of technological leader, first-mover firms, or firms following differentiation strategy (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997). High TO require firms to continuously upgrade technologically through persistent and substantial commitment, organizational and financial, to both internal and collaborative research and development (R&D), and ultimately creating technologically advanced products (Gatignon & Xuereb, 1997). TO is reflected in use of sophisticated technologies for new product development, more openness to fund technologically high-risk, high-reward projects, use of most up-to-date production technology, development of new-product with substantial new technology (Gao et al., 2007; Li, 2005; Salavou, 2005; and Zhou et al., 2005). Most researchers have found that though TO is generally associated with positive performance but, on occasion, may lead to negative effects (Gao et al. 2007).

Interrelationships

EO and LO: Wang (2008) reported that the EO–performance literature is well researched and established and generally more the EO better is the performance. Rauch et al. (2004) also concluded that firm's EO and performance are strongly related. Empirical findings support that LO positively impacts performance (Baker & Sinkula, 1999). Wang (2008), however, reported that the LO mediates between firms EO and its performance. Wang (2008) found that firm innovativeness and risk taking had highest and lowest correlation with the LO's dimensions respectively. His results also showed that the EO–LO–performance relationships differed by firm strategy. EO's impact on LO was more profound for prospectors than for analyzers (Wang, 2008).

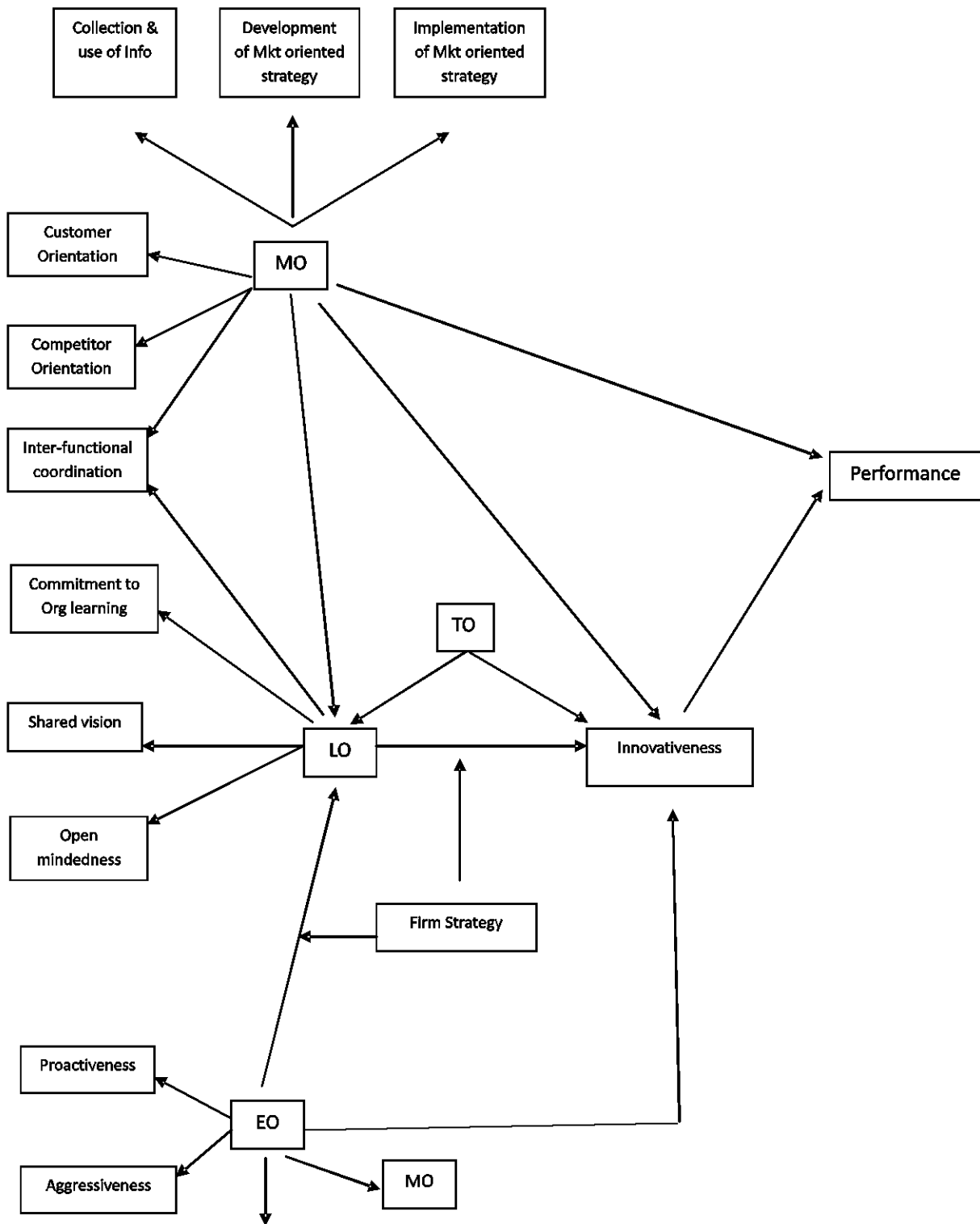
MO and LO: Marketing literature suggests that LO leads to MO (Baker & Sinkula, 1999). One of the central aspects of MO strategy is being driven by customer information. LO is

defined as an element of firms' proclivity to consciously and consistently gathering and analysing critical information. Hence, firms with LO capture the data to create and disseminate the information leading to improved decisions and actions (Baker & Sinkula, 1999) resulting in superior firm performance (Liu et al., 2002).

MO and EO: Market-oriented firms primarily strive to satisfy existing customer explicit or implicit needs in their core industry. Entrepreneurial firms on the hand undertake major product-market diversifications, and capitalize on opportunities that may be far from their core industry. Market related knowledge apart from product and technology related knowledge then serves as a critical input for entrepreneurial undertakings (Luo et al., 2005). MO thus may facilitate entrepreneurial ventures—decisions, and actions. Past studies also suggest that a firm's EO and MO are mostly positively associated, and that the firms simultaneously pursuing MO and EO report higher performance (Atuahene-Gima and Ko, 2001; Luo et al., 2005).

MO and TO: Both market and technology orientations promote innovativeness albeit of different kinds. While market oriented firms favour openness to new ideas that can help them better satisfy customer needs, technology oriented firms favour openness to new technologies. While market oriented firms look outside to customers and competitors to generate new information, technology oriented firms look both outside and inside in the technological sphere of organizational working to generate new information. Viewed from this perspective, actions of a technology oriented firm towards superior performance are more resource pushed as against the market pulled actions of a market oriented firms. Some researchers, e.g., Hunt and Morgan (1995), however, view MO as incorporating TO. Based on above discussion a conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Model (adapted from Keskin, 2006; Salavou, 2005; Wang, 2008, Zhou et al., 2005)



3. Future Research

The theoretical model proposed in the figure 1 can be empirically tested in future researches. Future research could involve questionnaire based data collection from the top managers of firms on the key constructs. In such a study, EO, MO, LO, and TO will serve as independent variables (IV), and firm output measure using profitability, market share, sales revenue growth or innovation as a dependent variable (DV). A combination of appropriate statistical analysis such as descriptive statistics, correlation, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) can be employed to study the structure of the data and the measurement model- how measured variables relate to latent variables- and the structural model- how latent variables to one another. Moreover, given that the nature of the study- a study of interlinkages among latent constructs- and sample of this study SEM shall be appropriate even though it requires high sample size. Wang (2008) has noted that methodologically, various orientation- performance studies are based on questionnaire data from single informants. This can lead to common method bias. This problem can be resolved by capturing data from multiple respondents, capturing data on IV and DV at different points from different source (e.g., financial statements for firm performance). The study might also need to control for firm size, age and industry.

4. Conclusion

Research gap in any scholarly conversation can primarily be found in the theory, methodology of investigation and the methods employed. Within theoretical challenges lie the way the assumptions are made, constructs are defined and operationalized, and theories borrowed from other disciplines are tested for applicability to new phenomenon etc. (Harms et al., 2007). On the methodological front gaps arise from challenging the operationalisation, measurement and application in different context etc. As discussed above, a survey of orientation literature throws theoretical challenges related to definition, nature-formative or reflective, and dimensionality of orientation construct. This paper notes that some of the orientations share some dimensions (e.g., inter-functional co-ordination is shared by MO and LO), and in other cases dimension of one orientation serves as input to the other (e.g. TO and EO's innovativeness). Many of such relationships among orientations (and their dimensions) have not been studied. This paper is a modest step in this direction.

Acknowledgment: *The first author acknowledges the seed money grant SM#253 provided by the IIM Lucknow.*

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