ROLE OF CUSTOMER-CENTRIC APPROACH AND ENTREPRENEURIAL ORIENTATION ON INNOVATION AMBIDEXTERITY OF SMES IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of a customer-centric approach and entrepreneurial orientation on innovation ambidexterity in Vietnamese small and medium enterprises. Although research on innovation ambidexterity has primarily focused on large firms, studies addressing the unique challenges small and medium enterprises face in balancing explorative and exploitative innovation, especially within the Vietnamese context remain limited. Using PLS-SEM analysis on data from 142 small and medium enterprises managers and team leaders, the findings reveal that both customer-centricity and entrepreneurial orientation positively influence ambidextrous innovation. Additionally, entrepreneurial orientation mediates this relationship, helping small and medium enterprises address both emerging and current market demands. This research enriches the literature of innovation ambidexterity by applying the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capability Theory to small and medium enterprises in a developing market and offers practical managerial implications for these firms.

VAI TRÒ CỦA CÁCH TIẾP CẬN LẤY KHÁCH HÀNG LÀM TRUNG TÂM VÀ ĐỊNH HƯỚNG SÁNG NGHIỆP ĐỐI VỚI TÍNH THUẬN CẢ HAI TAY TRONG ĐỔI MỚI CỦA CÁC DOANH NGHIỆP VỪA VÀ NHỎ

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TỪ KHÓA

Lấy khách hàng làm trung tâm
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Khả năng đổi mới thuận cả hai tay
Doanh nghiệp vừa và nhỏ
PLS-SEM

TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này xem xét tác động của cách tiếp cận lấy khách hàng làm trung tâm và định hướng sáng nghiệp đối với khả năng đổi mới thuận cả hai tay trong các doanh nghiệp vừa và nhỏ tại Việt Nam. Trong khi các đối tượng nghiên cứu trước đó thường là các tập đoàn lớn, nghiên cứu về các thách thức đặc thù mà các doanh nghiệp vừa và nhỏ đối mặt trong việc cân bằng giữa đổi mới mang tính khám phá và cải tiến, đặc biệt là trong bối cảnh Việt Nam, vẫn còn hạn chế. Phân tích PLS-SEM dữ liệu sơ cấp thu thập từ 142 quản lý và lãnh đạo nhóm tại các doanh nghiệp vừa và nhỏ cho thấy cả hai yếu tố này đều tác động tích cực đến khả năng đổi mới thuận cả hai tay. Định hướng sáng nghiệp đóng vai trò trung gian, giúp các doanh nghiệp vừa và nhỏ đáp ứng nhu cầu thị trường hiện có và tiềm năng. Nghiên cứu này đóng góp vào chủ đề đổi mới sáng tạo thuận cả hai tay khi ứng dụng Lý thuyết Nguồn lực và Lý thuyết Năng lực Động vào các doanh nghiệp vừa và nhỏ tại một thị trường đang phát triển và đề xuất hàm ý quản trị cho các doanh nghiệp này.

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1. Introduction

The evolution of technology has foster a competitive business landscape, compelling companies to continuously innovate and launch new products or services. In this dynamic environment, prior studies have emphasized the crucial role of organizational capabilities in both leveraging existing products, expertise, and resources, while simultaneously seeking out new opportunities for growth and innovation [1], [2]. Balancing exploration and exploitation in innovation is crucial. Overemphasizing exploitation hinders adaptability, while excessive exploration risks neglecting essential competencies for market success. These balancing is called innovation ambidexterity. It is grounded in organizational ambidexterity theory, which initially emphasized balancing exploration and exploitation for organizational adaptability [1]. Over time, it has been further refined through resource-based view and dynamic capabilities theory, highlighting the need for firms to leverage existing assets while continuously adapting to dynamic environments. Existing research has highlighted that achieving ambidexterity could bring benefits, albeit with challenges. Balancing these innovations also enables organizations to adapt to changing environments, seize new opportunities, and refresh their knowledge and capabilities [2]. However, achieving ambidexterity requires managing the tensions, oppositions between exploration and exploitation sides [3]. While firms were once thought to choose between these paths due to trade-offs [4], recent research suggests that they can pursue both at the same time in case of a properly structured context [3]. This topic was not be concerned a lot by researchers especially with SMEs in emerging countries. Although, SMEs have been proven essential for economic growth [5], and need to sustain competitive capability by leveraging their innovativeness between explore new opportunities and expoit current strategic business unit in order to growth [5]

This study also addresses critical research gaps in innovation ambidexterity, specifically within Vietnamese SMEs. First, while according to [6], [8] which has highlighted the positive effects of customer-centricity on innovation capabilities, it lacks of research about roles of customer-centricity, including customer orientation and customer relationship orientation influence on explorative and exploitative, which are dimensions of innovation ambidexterity. Second, given that most ambidexterity strategies have targeted large firms [3] with few exceptions acknowledging SMEs [5], [9], [10]. Third, this research fills a void in the Vietnamese SME landscape, where innovation ambidexterity is relatively new and underexplored. Although several studies have investigated explorative and exploitative innovation in Vietnamese companies, they excluded SMEs and utilized different variables such as technology-sensing, market-sensing capabilities [11]. These gaps in both international and domestic research present a valuable chance for this study to make substantial contributions.

This study aims to elaborate on the relationships between customer-centric approach, entrepreneurial orientation, and innovation ambidexterity in SMEs. It examines the direct impact of placing customers on priority (measured through two factors: customer orientation and customer relationship orientation) on innovation ambidexterity (comprising explorative innovation and exploitative innovation). Next, this study evaluates the potential mediating role of entrepreneurial orientation, exploring whether a strong entrepreneurial orientation facilitates the positive effects of customer focus on innovation ambidexterity.

2. Methodology

2.1. The research model and proposed hypothesis

This research examines the effect of customer centric approach to innovation ambidexterity and join effect of entrepreneurial orientation. The proposed hypotheses as follows:

H1: Customer-centric approach has a positive relationship with Innovation ambidexterity

H2: Entrepreneurial orientation has a positive relationship with Innovation ambidexterity

H3: Entrepreneurial orientation mediates the relationship between Customer-centric approach and Innovation ambidexterity.

The research model is depicted as follows:

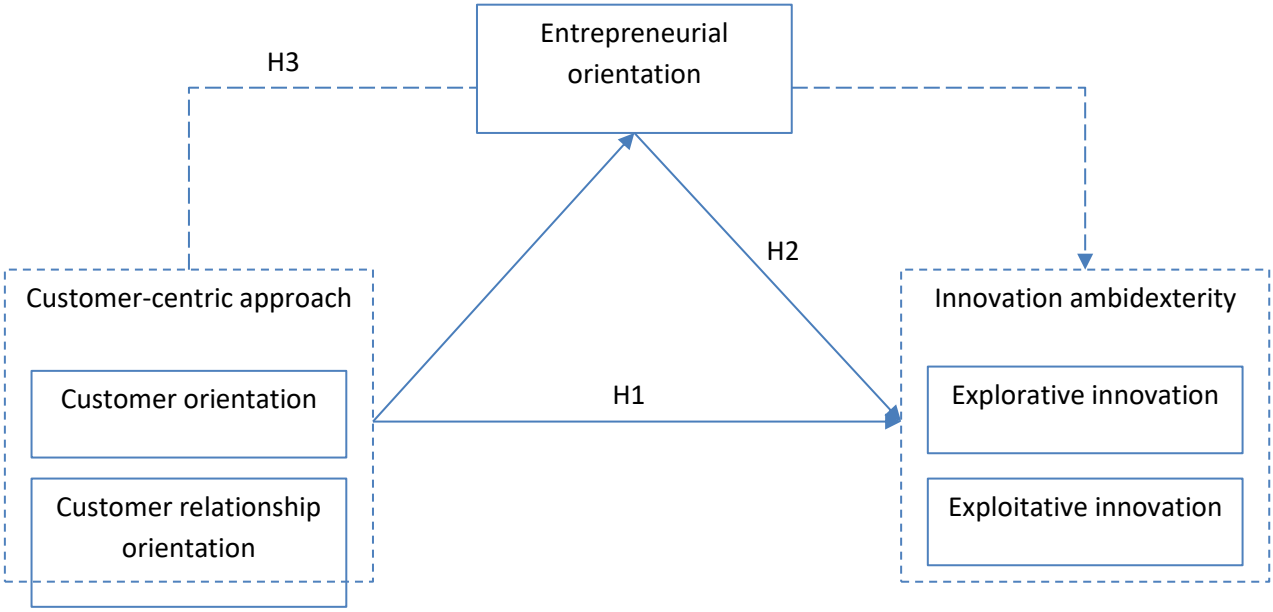

Figure.1. *The research model*

Figure 1. *Proposes the role of customer-centric approach and entrepreneurial orientation on innovation ambidexterity of SMEs in Vietnam*

2.2. Measurement scale

The research focuses on three key variables: a customer-centric approach (CCA), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), and innovation ambidexterity (IA), utilizing items derived from previous studies. CCA is measured through: customer orientation (five items) and customer relationship orientation (four items). These items, from Tuominen et al. [12], are rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). EO is characterized by proactiveness and risk-taking tolerance, with 6 items adapted from Zhang et al. [13], using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). IA encompasses both exploration (5 items) and exploitation (5 items), as assessed using items adopted from Chen et al. [14], rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Very low, 7 = Very high). Table 1 displays the measurement scale of each variable.

Table 1. *Measurement scale items for variables*

Code	Item description	Sources
Customer orientation		
CO1	Our business objectives are driven by customer satisfaction	Tuominen et al. [12]
CO2	We monitor our level of commitment to serving customers' needs	
CO3	Our strategy for competitive advantage is based on our understanding of customer needs	
CO4	Our business strategies are driven by our beliefs about how we can create greater value for customers	
CO5	We measure customer satisfaction systematically and frequently	
Customer relationship orientation		
CRO1	In our organization, retaining customers is considered to be a top priority	Tuominen et al. [12]
CRO2	Our employees are encouraged to focus on customer relationships	
CRO3	In our organization, customer relationships are considered to be a valuable asset	

Code	Item description	Sources
CRO4	Our senior management emphasizes the importance of customer relationships	
Entrepreneurial orientation		
EO1	Our firm favors a strong emphasis on tried and tested practices, equipment and processes	Zhang et al. [13]
EO2	In general, the top managers of our firm tend to invest in high-risk and high-return products and projects	
EO3	Our firm seeks to explore knowledge and information of products characterized by a tendency of experimental and risk-taking	
EO4	Our firm places a strong emphasis on products and services innovation activities	
EO5	Our firm tends to response to market and industrial changes ahead of competitors	
EO6	Our firm tends to initiate actions in the market and industry to take opportunities	
Explorative innovation		
ERI1	Acquired manufacturing technologies and skills entirely new to the firm?	Chen et al. [14]
ERI2	Learned product development skills and processes entirely new to the industry?	
ERI3	Acquired entirely new managerial and organizational skills that are important for innovation?	
ERI4	Learned totally new skills in funding new technology and training R&D personnel?	
ERI5	Strengthened innovation skills in areas where it has no prior experience?	
Exploitative innovation		
ETI1	Upgraded current knowledge for familiar products?	Chen et al. [14]
ETI2	Invested in exploiting mature technologies that improve the productivity of current innovation operations?	
ETI3	Enhanced abilities in searching for solutions to customer problems that are near to existing solutions?	
ETI4	Upgraded skills in product development processes in which the firm already possesses rich experience?	
ETI5	Strengthened the knowledge and skills to improve the efficiency of existing innovation activities?	

2.3. Population and sampling

The study surveyed managers and team leaders from SMEs with fewer than 200 employees, primarily located in Vietnam's three major economic centers: Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang, and time spans from November 2023 to April 2024. These cities represent the economic hubs of northern, central, and southern Vietnam, making the sample representative of SMEs nationwide. This target group was chosen because individuals in management positions are better positioned to assess their companies' innovation capabilities. An online survey yielded 201 responses, of which 142 were valid, resulting in a validity rate of 70.65%. The majority of the respondents hold a bachelor's degree (76.06%), with others holding college degrees (11.27%), master's degrees (10.56%), high school education (1.41%), and PhDs (0.7%). The respondents work in diverse industries: 52.11% in service firms and 47.89% in manufacturing firms. Firm size distribution shows 50% with 11-50 employees, 38.03% with 51-200 employees, and 11.97% with 1-10 employees. Regarding customer type, 49.30% serve business customers (B2B), 43.66% serve end-users (B2C), 3.52% serve both B2B and B2C, 1.41% provide goods and services to the government, and 2.11% serve all of the above customer types.

2.4. Data analysis

This research applies partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) through Smart PLS 4.0.9.2 to evaluate the predictive ability of the statistical model. The model includes two second-order constructs: Customer-Centric Approach (CCA), comprising Customer Orientation (CO) and Customer Relationship Orientation (CRO), and Innovation Ambidexterity

(IA), including Explorative Innovation (ERI) and Exploitative Innovation (ETI). A two-stage analysis approach is used to enhance model robustness, covering measurement and structural model assessments, and examining the mediating role of EO in the CCA–IA relationship. Variance Accounted For (VAF) analysis is applied to assess EO's mediating effect.

3. Results

3.1. Statistical analysis of the measurement scale

The analysis results in Table 2 reveal mean values of all observed variables ranging from 4.56 to 5.48. This suggests that respondents generally hold favorable views regarding the extent to which their enterprises engage in exploration and exploitation activities, maintain a customer-centric approach, and exhibit entrepreneurial orientation. However, the standard deviations, all greater than 1, indicate substantial variability in respondents' opinions. When comparing the mean scores of explorative innovation (ERI) and exploitative innovation (ETI), the findings suggest that SMEs in Vietnam tend to prioritize exploitation over exploration activities.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistic*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Customer orientation (CO)					
CO1	142	1	7	5.48	1.44
CO2	142	1	7	5.13	1.41
CO3	142	1	7	5.18	1.40
CO4	142	1	7	5.11	1.33
CO5	142	1	7	4.99	1.38
Customer relationship orientation (CRO)					
CRO1	142	1	7	5.18	1.41
CRO2	142	2	7	5.37	1.36
CRO3	142	2	7	5.20	1.38
CRO4	142	2	7	5.29	1.41
Entrepreneurial orientation (EO)					
EO1	142	1	7	5.02	1.43
EO2	142	1	7	4.56	1.49
EO3	142	1	7	4.73	1.41
EO4	142	2	7	5.00	1.34
EO5	142	1	7	5.02	1.34
EO6	142	1	7	4.86	1.32
EO1	142	1	7	5.02	1.43
Exploitative innovation (ETI)					
ETI1	142	1	7	4.97	1.47
ETI2	142	1	7	4.82	1.35
ETI3	142	1	7	4.99	1.41
ETI4	142	2	7	5.13	1.34
ETI5	142	2	7	4.97	1.41
Entrepreneurial orientation (EO)					
EO1	142	1	7	5.02	1.43
EO2	142	1	7	4.56	1.49
EO3	142	1	7	4.73	1.41
EO4	142	2	7	5.00	1.34
EO5	142	1	7	5.02	1.34
EO6	142	1	7	4.86	1.32

In this study, a pre-test was conducted with three experts under analysis to ensure the items were relevant within those business contexts. Clarity and readability of the items were confirmed in these pre-test interviews, supporting test validity. The measurement models for both first-order and second-order construct were evaluated for construct reliability (Cronbach alpha), convergent

validity (AVE) and discriminant validity (HTMT). All constructs show outer loadings and Cronbach's alpha values above the 0.7 threshold, indicating strong reliability [15]. Convergent validity is also confirmed, with Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeding 0.5 [16]. HTMT values for most variable pairs in the first-order construct are below 0.9, except for pairs CCA-CO, CCA-CRO, IA-ERI, IA-ETI, and EO-IA, which are above 0.9 (Table 3). HTMT values for the second-order construct are all less than 0.9 (Table 4).

Table 3. *Construct reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity (First-order construct)*

	Cronbach's alpha	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE	Discriminant validity					
					CCA	CO	CRO	EO	ERI	ETI
CCA	0.959	0.959	0.965	0.753						
CO	0.925	0.926	0.944	0.770	1.037					
CRO	0.932	0.932	0.952	0.831	1.022	0.956				
EO	0.913	0.917	0.932	0.697	0.792	0.823	0.734			
ERI	0.916	0.916	0.937	0.749	0.620	0.676	0.536	0.862		
ETI	0.919	0.920	0.940	0.757	0.868	0.879	0.832	0.867	0.771	
IA	0.938	0.939	0.947	0.643	0.797	0.833	0.733	0.925	0.996	0.995

Source: The authors

Table 4. *Construct reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity (Second-order construct)*

	Cronbach's alpha	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE	Discriminant validity	
					CCA	EO
CCA	0.941	0.950	0.971	0.944		
EO	0.913	0.917	0.932	0.697	0.795	
IA	0.830	0.836	0.922	0.854	0.849	0.883

Source: The authors

3.2. Evaluation of the structural model

In this study, the VIF value is 1.000 for CCA - EO, and 2.267 for both CCA - IA and EO - IA, all values are below 3, indicating no significant multicollinearity among the independent variables [17]. The adjusted R-squared values indicate that CCA explains 55.6% of the variation in EO, while CCA and EO together account for 76.6% of the variation in IA. The effect size results show CCA has a large effect on EO (f-squared = 1.267), a small effect on IA (f-squared = 0.135), and EO has a large effect on IA (f-squared = 0.832).

Through a Bootstrapping analysis of 5000 subsamples, the results in Table 5 indicate that all relationships: CCA - EO, CCA - IA, and EO - IA are significant, with p-values less than 0.05. All coefficients are positive, demonstrating a positive association in the research model. EO has a greater impact on IA compared to the CCA, with EO having a coefficient of 0.660 versus CCA's 0.266. The results are presented below:

Table 5. *Hypothesis testing results*

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
CCA -> EO	0.748	0.747	0.047	15.929	0.000
CCA -> IA	0.266	0.265	0.083	3.200	0.001
EO -> IA	0.660	0.661	0.077	8.606	0.000

Source: The authors

Table 6. *The indirect effect of customer-centric approach on innovation ambidexterity through entrepreneurial orientation*

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Specific indirect effect					
CCA -> EO -	0.493	0.493	0.064	7.670	0.000

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
> IA					
Total effect					
CCA -> EO	0.748	0.747	0.047	15.929	0.000
CCA -> IA	0.759	0.758	0.047	16.059	0.000
EO -> IA	0.660	0.661	0.077	8.606	0.000
Total indirect effect					
CCA -> IA	0.493	0.495	0.064	7.693	0.000

Source: The authors

The results in Table 6 reveal a specific indirect effect with a p-value less than 0.05 and a standardized effect coefficient of 0.493, indicating that EO mediates the relationship between CCA and IA. Thus, H3 is accepted. The direct effect between CCA and IA has a coefficient of 0.266 and a p-value of 0.001, indicating statistical significance. This demonstrates partial mediation, with direct and indirect effects in the same direction (0.266 * 0.493 > 0), classifying it as complementary partial mediation [18]. The Variance Accounted For (VAF) analysis, following [19], shows the mediating variable's contribution is statistically significant, with confidence intervals at 95% not containing zero. Hence, the VAF, calculated as the percentage of Total indirect effect divided by Total effect, equals 64.95%, indicating that the mediating variable EO accounts for 64.95% of the total effect from CCA to IA.

4. Discussion

The study results state the positive relationship between a customer-centric approach and innovation ambidexterity, which aligns with other study identifying a strong correlation between a customer-focused strategy and a firm's innovativeness, particularly in companies targeting international markets [12]. Additionally, this result also shed the light on role of customer orientation in innovation ambidexterity of small and medium enterprises.

Entrepreneurial orientation has a positive relationship with innovation ambidexterity. This finding is consistent with previous studies stating that EO relates to both the refinement of existing resources and the acquisition of new resources [20], and that EO plays a crucial role in enabling the simultaneous implementation of exploration and exploitation activities to help resource-constrained firms overcoming challenges [21]. On the other hand, an overemphasis on EO focused exclusively on innovation and growth may have drawbacks [22]. Excessive risk-taking and overwhelming focus on new opportunities may cause firms to neglect optimizing existing operations, thereby compromising their core competencies. These could arise from differences in research contexts, for example, firms in fast-paced, technology-driven sectors may require a stronger emphasis on exploration compared to those in more stable industries.

EO plays the mediating role in the relationship between CCA and IA, which aligns with research suggesting that firms with strong EO are more likely to leverage customer insights for innovative solutions [23]. EO, characterized by proactiveness, entails a firm's readiness to anticipate and respond to future market demands and requirements, introducing new products, processes, and services ahead of competitors to shape forthcoming demand and opportunities. EO emphasizes the efficient allocation of resources between exploration and exploitation activities, driven by customer needs and market opportunities.

These findings display some implications for developing innovation ambidexterity. Firstly, this study contributes to dynamic capability theory and resources-based view theory by demonstrating how a customer-centric approach enhances innovation ambidexterity in SMEs, enabling them to dynamically balance exploration and exploitation. Unlike traditional views that emphasize internal resources, this research highlights customer orientation as an external

dynamic capability, fostering adaptability and sustained competitive advantage in a rapidly evolving market.

Secondly, the study addresses the challenge of balancing innovation exploitation and exploration in SMEs, known as innovation ambidexterity. SMEs should embed customer insights into their business models to align products and services with market needs, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty, especially in emerging markets as Vietnam. SMEs should establish robust frameworks for collecting and analyzing customer feedback through various methods, such as surveys, focus groups, to tailor their offerings.

Finally, encouraging a proactive and risk-taking mindset across the organization is essential. This entrepreneurial orientation helps SMEs sense and respond to new opportunities and anticipate future demands, vital for navigating the Vietnamese market. Managers and team leaders are crucial in cultivating a customer-focused and entrepreneurial environment by championing innovation and aligning organizational objectives with these principles. Dedicating resources to employee development in areas such as customer empathy, problem-solving, and creative thinking can boost innovation ambidexterity within the company.

5. Conclusion

This study acknowledges limitations in sample size due to time and financial restrictions, which may lessen the representativeness of the findings. In addition, ambidextrous capabilities may vary across disciplines, sectors, and internal factors (e.g., vision, structure, strategy), which could be masked by the cross-sectional dataset. Thus, larger-scale longitudinal studies are recommended for more comprehensive data and methodological diversity to enhance depth, credibility, and insights.

The study empirically confirms a positive relationship between a customer-centric approach and innovation ambidexterity in Vietnamese SMEs, with entrepreneurial orientation as a mediator. This finding addresses a theoretical gap in the limited research on these variables in Vietnam. Practical insights suggest fostering a customer-centric mindset to drive innovation, integrating entrepreneurial thinking through training, and providing hands-on experiences for employees to interact with customers, thereby enabling explorative and exploitative innovation.

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