

The Effects of Brand orientation on Mexican SMEs Business Performance

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Abstract

Brand orientation is a relatively recent construct in marketing literature, and is considered by various researchers, academics, and professionals in the field of marketing as one of the business strategies that have the greatest significant positive effects on business performance. Furthermore, brand orientation has been analyzed in the few studies published in literature as a general construct and has not been analyzed and discussed in a disaggregated manner, that is, the effects of each of the constructs have not been analyzed and discussed. factors at the level of business performance. Therefore, using a sample of 300 small companies, the essential objective of this empirical study is the analysis and discussion of the effects of brand orientation on the level of business performance of small companies. The results obtained show that values, norms, artifacts, and behavior have significant positive effects on the level of business performance of small businesses.

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Keywords: Brand orientation, Brands, Business performance, Small firms.

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1. Introduction

The brand concept is one of the marketing activities, which has been analyzed and discussed relatively little in marketing literature (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). Likewise, various researchers, academics and marketing professionals have tried to rationalize and make efficient brand management systems which include, for example, brand perception, brand loyalty, brand knowledge, brand differentiation, brand equity, brand rewards, brand proliferation, brand image, and brand orientation (de Chernatony, 1992; Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003), thereby seeking to firms, mainly small and medium-sized (SMEs), achieve not only greater business performance but also their own survival (Yueqiang, 2022).

Furthermore, Piha *et al.* (2021) considered that the relationship between brand orientation and business performance is generally affected by external influences, while other researchers concluded that given the competitiveness level existing in business environment and implementing only a brand orientation. External aspects can generate a low influence on business performance, compared to internal aspects (Yueqiang, 2022). Therefore, in the current literature, the debate is open whether companies, particularly SMEs, should implement various orientations at the same time, as well as which brand orientation activities would most improve the level of success and business performance (Gul *et al.*, 2021a).

Under this context, there is not enough theoretical and empirical evidence to demonstrate that brand orientation exerts significant positive effects, both on success and business performance (Balmer, 2021; Gul *et al.*, 2021b). Therefore, there is not enough scientific evidence in the literature to support the assumption of the relationship between brand orientation and business performance, particularly in SMEs, mainly because the basic information of SMEs is often ignored. Therefore, the literature related to brand orientation and its effects on business performance in SMEs is very confusing and open to debate (Pardeshi & Khanna, 2021). Therefore, researchers and academics should guide their studies in providing robust empirical evidence that supports the assumption of the existing relationship between brand orientation and business performance, in a context of SMEs in emerging economy countries (Yueqiang, 2022).

In this sense, the objective of this study is the analysis and discussion of the effects of brand orientation on business performance in a context of manufacturing SMEs. To achieve this objective, an empirical study was carried out in manufacturing SMEs in Mexico, using a sample of 300 companies, estimating the research model through the *Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling* (CB-SEM) statistical technique, with the support of EQS 6.4 software (Bentler, 2005; Byrne, 2006; Brown, 2006). It is important to establish that it is essential to analyze SMEs for two basic reasons, on one hand, because they are the largest number of existing companies in Mexico and, on other hand, because they contribute more than 50% of GDP and employment at the national level (INEGI, 2023).

Additionally, given the existence of a lack of empirical knowledge in marketing literature about the link between brand orientation and business performance,

especially in SMEs, there is an urgent need to implement a holistic analysis with all those variables of brand orientation that substantially improve business performance (Dunes & Pras, 2013; Coleman *et al.*, 2015; Yueqiang, 2022), particularly in SMEs in emerging economy countries, as is the case of Mexico (Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Yueqiang, 2022). Under this context, the main contribution of this study is the provision of robust empirical evidence of the relationship between brand orientation and business performance of SMEs in an emerging economy country, as well as the contribution of scientific knowledge that contribute to filling the gap in the literature in the marketing field.

2. Preliminary Notes

Studies on the adoption and application of various strategic orientations in organizations have attracted increasing attention from researchers, academics, and industry professionals, particularly due to the importance of management decisions that allow firms to achieve higher performance levels (Yueqiang, 2022). Therefore, SMEs that give greater value to their brands and have a better orientation of their brands, generally have greater success in financial markets, compared to those competitors that have a lower brand orientation (Yueqiang, 2022). Thus, in a highly competitive and globalized market, companies, particularly SMEs, seek to obtain more competitive advantages, as well as greater business performance, for which brand orientation plays an essential role (Wong & Merrilees, 2005).

However, despite the importance of brand orientation, there are few studies published in the literature that analyze and discuss this construct, for two simple reasons. On one hand, because the few studies published in the current marketing literature have been oriented towards the presentation of theoretical models that seek an explanation and understanding brand orientation construct, and there are few studies that provide empirical evidence that gives support for the different theoretical arguments (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). On other hand, the benefits generated by a brand orientation have not been empirically well supported and applied in SMEs context, which is why the brand is generally considered as an inseparable part of the values of SMEs, and one of the most important assets of business strategies (Wong & Merrilees, 2005).

In this context, some researchers, academics, and marketing professionals have focused their studies on the development of a theoretical framework that explains brand orientation (Hankinson, 2001a; Bridson & Evans, 2004; Wong & Merrilees, 2005), while others have focused their studies on developing an empirical measurement model brand (Hankinson, 2001b; Ewing & Napoli, 2005), and only some studies have focused on providing empirical evidence of brand orientation (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). Likewise, there are few studies published in the marketing literature that have analyzed the link between brand orientation and business performance (Hankinson, 2002; Napoli, 2006). However, the few published studies generally consider brand orientation as a single construct, ignoring its internal structure (Wong & Merrilees, 2005).

Therefore, it is not surprising that brand orientation is generally considered in the literature as a business strategy, in which the brand becomes the center around which the main stakeholders of the companies interact (Mendes *et al.*, 2020), since brand orientation is closely related not only to business development but also to business performance (Wong & Merrilees, 2008; Anees-ur-Rehman *et al.*, 2018), as stated demonstrates its own conceptualization, since, according to Hodge *et al.* (2018: 396), brand orientation is defined as “*the degree to which companies' marketing strategy and activities focus on the brand to emphasize differences*”. In other words, brand orientation measures the extent to which a company is focused on its brand (Sarfraz *et al.*, 2021).

In this sense, the theoretical development of this concept has increased significantly in the last two decades, with scientific, academic, and business community seeking its analysis and discussion in different contexts and countries (Mendes *et al.*, 2020). Thus, Ewing and Napoli (2005) developed a scale for measuring brand orientation that had different applications, while Apaydin (2011) proposed a theoretical model that analyzed the antecedents and consequences of brand orientation in companies. Casidy (2013) analyzed the relationship of brand orientation with satisfaction and loyalty in the education sector, finding a positive relationship, while Shahijan *et al.* (2016) found a positive relationship between brand orientation and satisfaction of international students in Malaysia.

Anees-Ur-Rahman *et al.* (2017) analyzed brand orientation from consumer's perspective, calling this concept *perceived brand orientation*, while Liu *et al.* (2017) found a positive relationship between brand orientation and company results, including business performance. However, one of the models that generated the most impact in the literature was the one proposed by Wong and Merrilees (2005), which has as its starting point the market orientation literature (Narver & Slater, 1990; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Kohli *et al.*, 1993; Avlonitis & Gounaris, 1999; Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). This new model integrates the two perspectives of market orientation and translates the results of the theoretical model into the context of brands. With respect to the behavioral perspective, the model describes the phenomenon in terms of a specific behavior of the company (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990), while, in the cultural perspective, the model considers the point of view of the processes organizational, thereby facilitating the conjunction of both perspectives into one.

Additionally, this conceptual model incorporates the business culture model developed by Scheim (1992), which clearly distinguishes four factors: *values, norms, artifacts, and behaviors*. The results obtained from this model are conceptually like those presented by the market orientation model proposed by Homburg and Pflesser (2000), but these results are oriented to the brand rather than to the needs of consumers. Thus, the values measure the role that the brand has in the development of the business strategy, as well as in the understanding of the basic concepts of the brand. For their part, standards are related to the explicit or implicit extension of regulations and the influence of institutions, which determine a high percentage of the basic operations and management of the brand, such as, for

example, training integral to brand communication (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). Furthermore, artifacts are related to tangible symbols such as, for example, employee uniforms or company history (Swap *et al.*, 2001), which reflect and reinforce the brand's positioning in the market in which companies participate. Finally, behavior is totally related to the specific actions and communication that the company develops in support of the brand (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). Therefore, this new model proposes a causal relationship between values, norms, artifacts, and behaviors, which form a structure that is consistent with theories of organizational behavior (Katz & Kahn, 1978), management change (Gagliardi, 1986), attitude (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and market orientation (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). Thus, the internal importance of brand orientation of firms, particularly SMEs, is related to organizational values, and the values are supported by the general literature of the brand of the companies' products or services (Tosti & Stotz, 2001; Vallester & de Chernatony, 2006), and company values in turn are closely related to business performance, since these values are transmitted through the brand of the various products or services that companies offer to consumers, are considered the basis for the explicit and implicit development of brand orientation and business performance (Wong & Merrilees, 2005; 2008). Therefore, considering the information presented above, it is possible to propose the first research hypotheses.

H1: The higher level of values, higher level of business performance

With respect to standards, SMEs can work without any problem in accordance with the rules that establish the execution of brand strategy, but only if employees and workers understand and accept its implementation and this strategy is fully consistent with existing values in the organization (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). Therefore, the role of brands is to practically increase employees' and workers' knowledge of the brand of the products and services generated by SMEs, so that this provides support for the acceptance of the standards that govern throughout the company (Wong & Merrilees, 2005; 2015). This positive connection between the brand and the standards means that the standards facilitate obtaining an increased level of business performance. Thus, considering the information presented above, it is possible to propose the second research hypotheses.

H2: The higher level of norms, higher level of business performance

As for artifacts, apart from reinforcing company norms, they can also have a strong influence on brand orientation behavior of SMEs, by virtue of their communication function (Wong & Merrilees, 2005; 2015). Therefore, artifacts can act not only as a correct definition of brand behavior of SMEs' products or services, but also as substantial elements that drive the generation of growth in the level of business performance, motivated and driven by the companies' staff personnel, who must have correct orientation in their daily work behavior (Dandridge *et al.*, 1980). Therefore, considering the information presented previously, the third research hypothesis can be proposed.

H3: The higher level of artifacts, higher level of business performance

Finally, the specific behavior of brand orientation of the products or services of SMEs is fully supported by the belief that the brand is a fundamental factor in the success of the organization, and in understanding that this is one of the basic principles of brand management at a managerial level (Hankinson, 2002). Therefore, the behavior exhibits the relative general character that companies have, and generally has a significant positive influence not only on brand orientation behavior of the products or services of SMEs, but also on business performance (Wong & Merrilees, 2005; 2015). Thus, considering the information previously presented, it is possible to propose the fourth research hypotheses.

H4: The higher level of behavior, higher level of business performance

To respond to the four research hypotheses raised in this paper, an empirical study was carried out in Aguascalientes State SMEs (Mexico), for which the business directory of Mexican Business Information System (SIEM) of the Aguascalientes State was considered, which had registered around 1,227 firms with 11 to 250 employees as of November 30, 2019. Likewise, a questionnaire was designed that was delivered to the company managers for completion, who requested the support of the personnel in charge of marketing, and the questionnaire was applied to a sample of 300 SMEs selected through simple random sampling, with an error maximum of ± 5 and a reliability level of 95% and was applied between February to April 2020.

Furthermore, to measure brand orientation, the scale proposed by Baumgarth (2010) was used, who considered that it is possible to measure brand orientation through four factors: *Value* measured using a scale of 5 items; *Norms* measured through a 6-item scale; *Artifacts* measured using a 4-item scale and *Behaviors* measured using a 4-item scale. In addition, business performance was measured using 8 traditional indicators built from the perception of SMEs managers about their competitive position with respect to market share, profitability, and productivity (AECA, 2005). All items of the five factors were measured through a five-point Likert-type scale with 1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree.

Likewise, the application of a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was considered relevant to evaluate the reliability and validity of brand orientation and business performance scales, using the maximum likelihood method and EQS 6.2 software (Bentler, 2005; Brown, 2006; Byrne, 2006). Thus, reliability was measured through Cronbach's alpha and the Composite Reliability Index (CFI) proposed by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). Furthermore, the results obtained from CFA application are presented in Table 1 and indicate that the theoretical model has a good fit data ($S-BX^2 = 1,554.171$; $df = 265$; $p = 0.000$; $NFI = 0.854$; $NNFI = 0.869$; $CFI = 0.876$; $RMSEA = 0.079$), with Cronbach's alpha and IFC values greater than 0.7, which demonstrates the existence of reliability in brand orientation and business performance scales (Nunally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 1995).

Likewise, the results obtained show that all the items of the related factors are significant ($p < 0.01$), the value of all the standardized factor loadings are greater than 0.6 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), and the Extracted Variance Index (EVI) of each pair of constructs of the theoretical model has a value greater than 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), which indicates that this theoretical model has a good fit data, thereby evidencing the existence of convergent validity.

Table 1: Internal consistency and convergent validity of the theoretical model

Variable	Indicator	Loading Factorial	Robust t-value	Cronbach Alpha	CFI	EVI
Values	VM1	0.969***	1.000 ^a	0.978	0.979	0.901
	VM2	0.972***	78.318			
	VM3	0.958***	46.364			
	VM4	0.939***	36.696			
	VM5	0.907***	29.409			
Rules	NM1	0.880***	1.000 ^a	0.928	0.929	0.686
	NM2	0.855***	32.830			
	NM3	0.868***	23.206			
	NM4	0.836***	20.211			
	NM5	0.776***	19.035			
	NM6	0.745***	17.437			
Artifacts	AM1	0.965***	1.000 ^a	0.984	0.985	0.944
	AM2	0.974***	74.586			
	AM3	0.979***	51.337			
	AM4	0.968***	43.907			
Behaviors	CM1	0.953***	1.000 ^a	0.942	0.943	0.807
	CM2	0.930***	37.110			
	CM3	0.891***	29.853			
	CM4	0.812***	22.354			
Business Performance	RE1	0.601***	1.000 ^a	0.917	0.918	0.659
	RE2	0.624***	15.361			
	RE3	0.848***	12.513			
	RE4	0.923***	11.940			
	RE5	0.930***	12.073			
	RE6	0.875***	11.607			
$S-BX^2$ (gl = 265) = 1,554.171; $p < 0.000$; NFI = 0.854; NNFI = 0.869; CFI = 0.876; RMSEA = 0.079						

a = Parameters constrained to that value in the identification process

*** = $p < 0.01$

Additionally, the discriminant validity of the theoretical model of brand orientation and business performance was measured through two tests, which are presented in Table 2. On one hand, the confidence interval test proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) is presented, which establishes that with a 95% confidence interval, none of the individual elements of the latent factors of the correlation matrix have the value 1. On other hand, the proposed extracted variance test is presented by Fornell and Larcker (1981), which establishes that the variance extracted from each pair of constructs is lower than its corresponding EVI. Thus, according to the results obtained from the application of both tests, it is possible to conclude that both tests demonstrate sufficient evidence of the existence of discriminant validity.

Table 2: Discriminant validity of the theoretical model

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Values	0.901	0.594	0.316	0.314	0.063
2. Rules	0.609- 0.933	0.686	0.313	0.329	0.089
3. Artifacts	0.416- 0.845	0.382–0.738	0.944	0.110	0.062
4. Behaviors	0.375- 0.747	0.422–0.726	0.178- 0.486	0.807	0.062
5. Business Performance	0.156- 0.348	0.219–0.379	0.143- 0.355	0.148- 0.352	0.659

The diagonal represents the Extracted Variance Index (EVI), whereas above the diagonal the variance is presented (squared correlation). Below diagonal, the estimated correlation of factors is presented with 95% confidence interval.

3. Main Results

To respond to the four hypotheses raised in this empirical study, a CB-SEM was applied using EQS 6.2 software (Bentler, 2005; Byrne, 2006; Brown, 2006). Likewise, the nomological validity of the theoretical model of brand orientation and business performance was analyzed using Chi square test, in which the results obtained between the theoretical model and the measurement model were compared, obtaining non-significant results, which allows establishing an explanation of the observed relationships between the latent constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Hatcher, 1994). Table 3 shows in greater detail the results obtained from the application of CB-SEM.

Table 3: Results of CB-SEM application

Hypothesis	Structural Relationship	Standardized Coefficient	Robust t-value
H1: Higher level of values, higher level of business performance.	Values → Business Performance	0.268***	4.252
H2: Higher level of standards, higher level of business performance.	Rules → Business Performance	0.223***	3.338
H3: Higher level of artifacts, higher level of business performance.	Artifacts → Business Performance	0.144**	2.078
H4: Higher level of behavior, higher level of business performance.	Behavior → Performance	0.277***	4.628
$S-BX^2$ (gl = 265) = 1,554.433; $p < 0.000$; NFI = 0.854; NNFI = 0.868; CFI = 0.869; RMSEA = 0.079			

*** = $P < 0.01$

Table 3 shows the results obtained from CB-SEM application and, with respect to hypothesis H1 ($\beta = 0.268$, $p < 0.01$), they indicate that values have significant positive effects on business performance. Regarding hypothesis H2 ($\beta = 0.223$, $p < 0.01$), the results show that norms have significant positive effects on business performance. Regarding hypothesis H3 ($\beta = 0.144$, $p < 0.05$), the results indicate that artifacts also have significant positive effects on business performance. Finally, regarding hypothesis H4 ($\beta = 0.277$, $p < 0.01$), the results show that behavior has significant positive effects on business performance. Therefore, it is possible to establish that the four factors that measure brand orientation significantly positively affect the level of business performance of SMEs.

4. Discussion

The results obtained in this paper have numerous implications that need to be established, the first of which is that a high percentage of SMEs, not only in Mexico but also in any other Latin American country, generally lack a registry brand of their products or services, for which managers, as part of the substantial activities of brand orientation, will have to direct their efforts, in the first instance, on the registration of their trademarks, because this will allow them not only have the intellectual property rights of the same, but even prevent SMEs that are their main competitors from marketing products or services with a similar brand name, or using commercial symbols similar to theirs.

A second implication derived from the results obtained is that brand orientation must be considered as a business strategy, which must be fully aligned with other strategies of SMEs, in such a way that managers try to the best of their ability of giving priority to the brand strategy, so that the organization is in better conditions not only to obtain a greater market position, but also to achieve a significant increase in its business performance. Otherwise, if a priority is not given to brand strategy, the company will put at risk not only the increase in sales of its products or services, but also its own survival in the markets in which it participates.

A third implication of these results is that SME managers have to involve all of the departments or functional areas of the organization in the adoption and implementation of brand orientation, since it will be essential to have a greater probability of obtain more and better business results, that all departments or functional areas of SMEs work in coordination and collaboration, with the firm objective of achieving a more efficient and effective brand orientation, because this will allow SMEs not only the possibility of obtaining more and better competitive advantages, but also a significant increase in the level of business performance.

A fourth and final implication of the results obtained is that SME managers will have to make all those necessary adjustments to the organizational culture that prevails in their companies, in such a way that those values that encourage collaborative work between employees and others predominate workers, especially in all those activities related to the brand orientation of the products or services of SMEs, since this will allow companies to significantly reduce the response time for changes or improvements to the products or services that their clients and consumers demand, as well as the total costs of the organization, which could be translated without any problem not only into a significant increase in the level of sales of SMEs, but also in their level of business performance.

5. Conclusion

Additionally, this study has various conclusions that require analysis, the first of which is related to the sample used since only SMEs that had between 11 and 250 employees were considered, which is why in subsequent studies it would be pertinent to use a sample with all SMEs (1 to 250 employees) to corroborate whether the results obtained are similar. A second conclusion is that the information collection survey was only applied to SMEs in Aguascalientes State (Mexico), so in subsequent studies it would be convenient for the same survey to be applied at the national level and even in other Latin American countries. This is to check if the results obtained are similar.

A third conclusion is the scales used to measure brand orientation and business performance, since only a scale that has four factors with 19 items was used to measure brand orientation, and only 6 items for business performance measurement, so in subsequent studies it would be convenient to use a completely different scale to measure both constructs and thereby corroborate the results obtained. A fourth conclusion is that only qualitative variables were considered for the measurement

of brand orientation and business performance, which is why in subsequent studies it would be convenient to use quantitative variables to corroborate whether the results obtained are similar or not to those obtained in this paper.

Finally, a fifth conclusion of this research work is that the survey to collect the information was only applied to the managers and/or owners of the selected SMEs, with which it was assumed that all the managers of the SMEs have extensive knowledge of the activities required by brand orientation and business performance, which is why in subsequent studies it would be very convenient to apply this same information collection survey to both employees and workers of the same organization to corroborate whether the results obtained are similar or not to those obtained in this study.

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