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Determining the Antecedents of Marketing Competencies of SMEs for International Market Performance

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Abstract

Marketing scholars and practitioners have questioned the relationship between marketing activities and firm performance. However, the entrepreneurial vision as a background factor for marketing activities designed and implemented has not been linked to firm performance. By doing this, the authors investigate the relationship between the invisible and visible parts of market performance in the context of SMEs' international marketing process. The leading effort in this study is to explore the marketing capabilities as the antecedents of the performance in international markets, and also to understand the relationship between entrepreneurial vision of SMEs and their marketing capabilities. A research model developed by the authors is employed for empirical analyses based on 209 questionnaires from SMEs in manufacturing industry.

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1. Introduction

One of the most important concepts for all enterprises in every size and every sector is *market performance*. As the market success of the firm is a consequence of its market performance, it will be pertinent to state that *performance* is a direct determinant on the *consequence*. On the other hand, Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SME) represent the most populous group of firms in national economies.

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Within this context, it is generally accepted fact that SMEs form the basis of national economies. Therefore, it is clear that the stronger SMEs get, the stronger national economies become on the whole.

It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for firms to strengthen having manufacturing capacity and activity at high levels. Such old perspectives as “product-orientation” and “production-orientation” fall short of reaching firms to market success in today’s markets with full of alternatives for every kind of product and service and where competition takes place at highest level. Thus, the existence of marketing skills and organization-wide intellectual capacity related with these skills is a *sine qua non* factor for SMEs as it is for all kinds of organizations. SMEs are market players that conduct their activities with limited means and by struggling against the challenges posed by the limited means. they have to make an endeavor for the natural challenges (competition, economic and political crises, etc.) in the market while taking up the secondary challenges (financial needs, innovation problems, etc.) posed by their own limited sources. In this sense, the success of SMEs in market performance will denote overcoming the two categories in question.

As the alternatives are limited in local markets and the whole market is not big enough for all enterprises, international markets are regarded as a solution field for SMEs in terms of both categories above-mentioned. Within this framework, the objective of this study is to question international markets standing for a basic solution field for SMEs and the competencies determining market performance in international marketing. Another objective is to question the impact of the outlook of SMEs on international marketing and their vision regarding entrepreneurship on developing marketing competencies in the process of internationalization, in order to detect the main determinants of these competencies. Lastly, it is the main starting point of this study to comprehend which marketing competencies feed international market performance that will help SMEs enhance and strengthen.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Core Concepts in International Marketing Competencies of SMEs: Entrepreneurial Vision and International Marketing-Oriented Awareness

Vision, whose lexical meaning is “view”, “foresight” and so forth, can be explained as “targets to be reached” in terms of a strategic perspective. Having a vision, being aware of his/her mission and being ambitious are among the most prominent qualifications of successful entrepreneurs. They are committed to their jobs with passion and it is indispensable for them to wish for competition and winning (Ireland et al. 2001). Successful entrepreneurs have an aptitude for perceiving the signals which others miss to understand. They exert themselves to the utmost in order to develop vision in markets which are of interest to them. From this point of view, vision is directly related with the imagination and precognition of an entrepreneur. The development process of entrepreneurship is directly related with entrepreneurial vision. Entrepreneurial vision involves and shapes enterprise efforts, in other words, attempts. Entrepreneurial vision has a determinative role in setting notable strategies in market and in putting effective decision processes into practice within the frame of these strategies (Lyon et al. 2000). It gets ever harder to set strategy for creating competitive advantage in the fierce and multi-dimensional competition environment of the market. In such an environment where mobility is the key characteristic, proactive strategies or the skill to determine aggressive attempts for market have the potential to provide advantage in terms of competition (Atuahene-Gima and Ko, 2001). Entrepreneurial vision has a trigger role in revealing the above-mentioned potential. Several roles like pioneer, observer and defensive which enterprises perform in the market are shaped by their entrepreneurial visions. Besides, such acts as risk

taking, gaining experience, seeking opportunities and making pioneer attempts for the market are directly associated with entrepreneurial vision. Entrepreneurs with entrepreneurial vision can prefer to struggle by setting goals in order to overcome the seemingly impossible challenges in the market. They are aware of the fact that they cannot reach an ideal, in other words; they cannot acquire the desired market performance by spontaneous efforts. This awareness is in question for both local and global markets.

Business managers have to head for foreign markets and regard the world as a whole in terms of production and market. Globalization, shaping markets from the point of enterprises, also changes consumption patterns and leads to the emergence of new consumer markets (Zahra et al., 2000). Similar social classes are formed in different countries of the world and new market opportunities appear according to different demands and expectations shaped by cultural properties. It is highly critical for the enterprises which try to survive in the ever-increasingly severe competition conditions and especially are stuck in local markets due to several structural disadvantages that entrepreneurs perceive the opportunities and threats posed by the mentioned changes whose main dynamics are technological developments. Entrepreneurs' abilities to seize the mentioned market opportunities are closely linked to their awareness level regarding this issue. Awareness is expressed in social sciences as a combination of the relationship of human mind with itself and with the world in the context of its actions and intuitions. In other saying, it means creatures' being aware and awake of themselves and the events around them (Tulving, 1985). It is of critical importance that entrepreneurs become aware of the opportunities offered by the changes in the circle of international markets in order to perceive and seize these opportunities.

2.2. Innovation Orientation

Innovation orientation, with a critical role in reaching entrepreneurial targets, reflects the ability of an enterprise to offer a new service/product and the success it has earned accordingly. Therefore, the importance of innovations has been thoroughly examined in the literature with different perspectives like the firm's survival (Dyer and Song, 1998), profitability (Ali et al., 1993) and expansion and development in new fields (Danneels and Kleinschmidt, 2001). Innovation is a field which is still current and interesting for both theoreticians and practitioners. The importance enterprises attach to the innovation issue and their special strategies hereof increase the number of new products/services in the market. In this respect, the ability of an enterprise to present a new product is considered as a measure of its market performance. Innovation orientation has a determinative role in delivering successful offerings in global markets as in local markets (Morris et al., 2002, Hallback, Gabrielsson, 2013). Due to the close ties between the innovation skill and the adaptation practice skill, it can be asserted that innovation-oriented enterprises lead the field in developing successful market offerings. Reviews about innovations generally focus on product/service and technology (Gasmann and Keupp, 2007), but innovation also contains such fields with a potential to create difference in the market as distribution channels, e-marketing practices and brand.

2.3. Brand Orientation

Consumers seeking for both quality and affordable price in the products they want to purchase consent to pay more only for branded products depending on the perceived value. On the other hand, consumer needs and expectations cannot be satisfied without brand (Urde et al., 2013). Thus, the ability to create brand/brands perceived as valuable by consumers has been accepted to be an indicator of market success. The enterprises with brand equity are preferred and purchased more by consumers. Moreover, they can

reduce financial risks, gain more advantage in credit financing and possess bargaining power in acquisitions or mergers. On the other hand, research findings demonstrate that brands are slightly touched by the adverse effects of crises and even more some enterprises can increase their brand equity in the crisis period (www.brandfinance.com). It proves how important it is for enterprises to develop brand-oriented market practices in crisis periods. Brand orientation can be explained as the importance attached to brand by an enterprise and its development level in terms of brand. Creating and developing a brand with the purpose of taking long-term competition advantage and perpetuating the brand equity in parallel with active customer relations underlie the brand-oriented perspective (Bridson and Evans, 2004). With this strategy, the threats posed by the offerings of competitors can be turned into an opportunity (Urde, 1999). As this process is so important, it is necessary to plan it with a strategic management perspective and to implement and control special strategies for the brand. Brand management includes a number of strategic and tactical decision processes. Brand name, visual identity with its constituents and especially communication strategies and decisions constitute critical junctures in terms of performance in the process of brand creation.

2.4. Marketing Communication Skills

Thanks to the developments in technology and transportation, products, just like people, are able to be transported to new international markets easily and economically. However, ensuring consumers exhibit positive attitudes and behaviors towards products in international markets with different cultures poses a problem for enterprises. Enterprises have difficulties in defining their institutional identities in both local and international markets, in expressing themselves to consumers and in introducing their market offerings to consumers. In order to overcome these difficulties, it gains more importance day by day for enterprises to be conscious about marketing communication and to develop their skills in this regard. Marketing communication involves the processes of creating communication opportunities and sending messages to and receiving messages from consumers in order to create the desired reactions in the target audience (Biçkes and Deniz, 2002). The aims of marketing communication are generally to support sales, to create product and brand awareness, to develop product and corporate image and to shape the attitudes and behaviors of the target audience (Ünüsün and Sezgin, 2005). Among the studies in the literature there are studies in the fields of product launch (Chen et al. 2007), rebrand (Batchelora and Formentin, 2008) and digital media (Winer, 2009) which have examined the positive effect on market activities of using market communication in accordance with the targets. With reference to these data, the following seven hypotheses have been developed:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the entrepreneurial vision (EV) and the international marketing-oriented awareness (IMO) of SMEs.

H2: There is a positive relationship between the international marketing-oriented awareness (IMO) and the brand orientation (BO) of SMEs.

H3: There is a positive relationship between the international marketing-oriented awareness (IMO) and the innovation orientation (IO) of SMEs.

H4: There is a positive relationship between the international marketing-oriented awareness (IMO) and the international marketing communication orientation (IMC) of SMEs.

H5: There is a positive relationship between the brand orientation (BO) and the international market performance (IMP) of SMEs.

H6: There is a positive relationship between the innovation orientation (IO) and the international market performance (IMP) of SMEs.

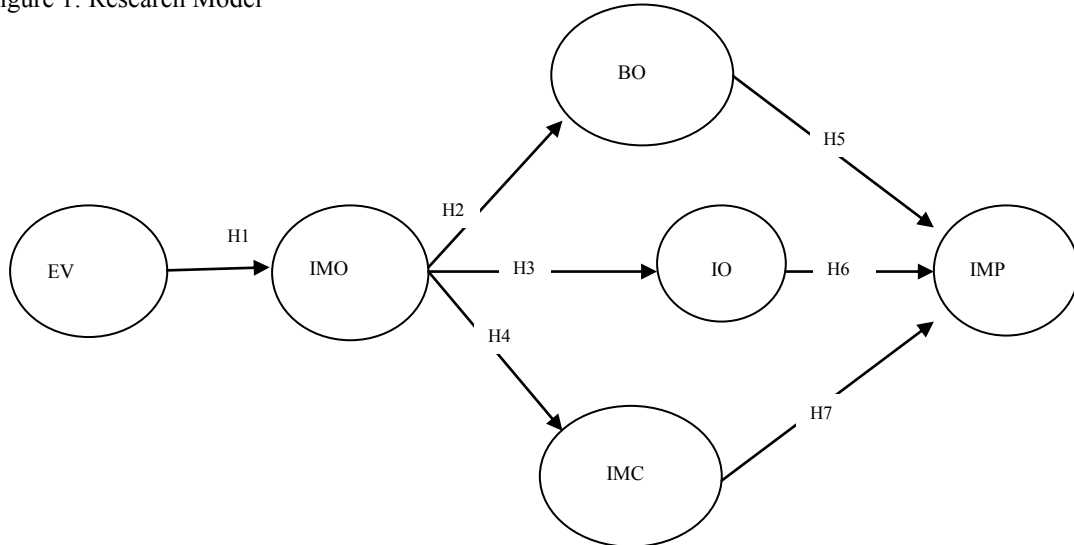
H7: There is a positive relationship between the international marketing communication orientation (IMC) and the international market performance (IMP) of SMEs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Aim of the Study and Research Model

The main aim of this study is to understand to what extent the entrepreneurial visions, international marketing-oriented awareness and focusing levels of SMEs are effective on their international market performance. Competition, taking place in almost every industry at highest levels, is one of the biggest threats for the market players under the market conditions of both today and foreseeable future. Besides, the abilities of enterprises to perceive the general trends in markets, the current and possible consequences of globalization, opportunities and threats gain importance in the harsh market conditions. Reaching easily to expertise in every process and being managed by highly intellectual people grant an important advantage to large scale enterprises. On the other hand, not being able to reach highly qualified professionals and being managed by generally their founders with traditional knowledge cause SMEs to have difficulty in “understanding local and global markets properly”. In other words, “the ability to analyze the developments in local and global markets”, which is an advantage for big firms, turns into a critical factor for SMEs. In this regard, within a framework of a research model, this study aims to determine the reflection of the EV and IMO levels of SMEs on strategic marketing activities and eventually their impact on IMP. The research model developed within the context of this study is presented in the Figure-1.

Figure 1: Research Model



3.2. Method, Scope, Scale

The data necessary for this study have been gathered by using questionnaire technique and field research. The main reason of preferring this method is that its data gathering process can be managed more effectively and data can be categorically analyzed easily with it. In the questionnaire form, there are 33 expressions presented in 5-point Likert scale apart from demographic questions. The scales selected through literature review for the 6 variables in the research model have been aggregated within an “eclectic model” and offered to answerers. The expressions addressed to the participants have been prepared according to the 5-point Likert scale. For EV, the study has grounded on the framework proposed by Webster (1992), Dess, Lumpkin and Covin (1997) and Knight (1997). For BO, it has grounded on the framework of Urde (1999) and the scale of Napoli (2006). The scales of Lumpkin and Dess (1996) and O’Cass and Weerawardana (2009) have been based upon for IMO. For IO, ENTRESALE prepared by Covin and Slevin (1989) has been adapted and the study of Low, Chapman and Sloan has been utilized. For measuring the IMC variable, we used the approaches of Low and Mohr (2001) and Solberg (2002). We also benefited from the studies of Knight (2000) and Cavusgil and Zou (1994) to measure the IMP variable, the basic dependent variable in the research model.

The sample group of this study consists of SMEs operating in the manufacturing industry, some of which are members of TUSKON (Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists) and some of which are independent firms with no umbrella organization. We have received help from the groups in Istanbul organized industrial zones to reach the firms in the second group and carried out judgment sampling by using non-random sampling. The reason of designating two separate SME groups is the concern that the firms in the first group may possess uniform perspectives as they are members of the same organization. Therefore, the sample group has been relatively diversified by including some SMEs which are not members of any umbrella organization. Within this framework, we got in contact with MARIFED (Marmara Federation of Business Life Associations), an affiliate of TUSKON, and informed more than 1000 SMEs which are members of 38 associations affiliated to this federation about this research. Questionnaire forms were sent through MARIFED to 500 ones, which are relatively bigger and operate in the manufacturing sector, out of these 1000 firms. 157 forms were answered and returned from this group. 13 forms were unclassified due to the errors they contained. Thereby, 144 questionnaires were reached out of this group and the comeback rate is 28.8%. On the other side, we contacted with 145 SMEs with no membership to any social umbrella organization. The comeback rate of this group is 44.8% (65 questionnaire forms). The total number of questionnaires returned in the data collecting phase in the period of January – February 2013 is 209. According to the literature the *Cronbach Alfa* coefficient higher than 0.60 for each variable in the research model is an important indicator of scale credibility (Nakip, 2006). The *Alfa* coefficients for the basic variables of the scale used in this study are shown in the Table-3. According to the table, the *Cronbach Alfa* coefficients vary between 0.77 and 0.88. This can be accepted as a proof of scale credibility.

4. Findings

As it has been explained in the method chapter, the data used in this study have been acquired from the owners or managers of the SMEs operating in the manufacturing sector. Some descriptive statistics about the sampling are shown in the Table-1.

Table-1: Descriptive Statistics about Sampling

	n	%		n	%
SMEs Age			Education		
Less than 5 years	43	20.5	Postgraduate	19	9.1
6 – 10 years	62	29.6	Graduate	62	29.6
More than 10 years	104	49.7	Secondary education	101	48.3
Participants			Others	27	12.9
Firm owner	169	80.8	Export Rate		
Manager	40	19.1	Total sales more than % 50	22	10.5
			Total sales between % 25 - % 50	69	33.0
			Total Sales between % 10 - % 25	40	19.1
			Total sales less than % 10	78	37.3

As it is seen in the Table-1, the majority of the sampling group who provides data flow consists of proprietors. It is observed that almost half of the participants hold secondary education degree. Almost half of the SMEs in the sampling have more than ten-year experience. More than one third of the sampling engages in export, but the export rate constitutes less than 10% of the total sales, thereby making it very low. However, 10.5% of the sampling has an export volume measuring more than 50% of the total sales.

4.1. Assessing the Measuring Model

The validity and credibility of the scales have been tested through the LISREL 8.30 program as a step for the tests to be done for checking over the hypotheses of this study. There are some views in the literature asserting that the LISREL program is one the most appropriate tools for examining multiple correlations (Narasimhan and Jayaram, 1998). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) has been used for testing the validity of the measuring model. The measuring model consists of 33 factors describing 6 latent variables. These factors are entrepreneurial vision (EV), international marketing-oriented awareness (IMO), brand orientation (BO), innovation orientation (IO), international marketing communication orientation (IMC) and international market performance (IMP). CFA has been utilized to verify the 33 factor-structure used in the study. In the first phase of checking over, the goodness of fit statistics and modification indexes of the model have been broadly examined without any limitation or addition to the model. The goodness of fit index has demonstrated as a result of the first analysis that the model is inadequate (Table-2).

Table-2: Goodness of Fit Statistics

Goodness of fit statistics						
χ^2 / df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	NFI	GFI	AGFI
3.86	0.068	0.055	0.784	0.873	0.810	0.706

The measuring model has been amended by eliminating 8 factors with high correlation which ruin the coherence between the data and the model, affect the normal distribution adversely and invalidate the model as a whole when the correction indexes and surplus values in the LISREL are examined.

All the coefficients for the main variables in the model are above 0.60, the threshold value suggested in the literature (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) (Table-5). This is an indicator of high interior credibility. Table-3 presents the coefficients of average variance extracted (AVE) along with the coefficients of composite credibility.

Table-3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

<i>Factor item</i>	<i>Standart loading</i>	<i>Error Variance</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.Dev</i>	<i>Cronbach's α</i>	<i>Construct reliability (CR)</i>	<i>Average variance exrtacted (AVE)</i>
Entrepreneurial Vision				4.10*	0.89	0.823	0.90	0.64
EV1	0.85	0.28	0.72					
EV2	0.78	0.41	0.60					
EV3	0.85	0.28	0.72					
EV4	0.71	0.51	0.50					
EV5	0.84	0.29	0.70					
international marketing-oriented awareness **				4.36**	0.98	0.812	0.87	0.58
IMO1	0.71	0.51	0.50					
IMO3	0.89	0.32	0.79					
IMO4	0.65	0.56	0.42					
IMO5	0.81	0.34	0.65					
IMO6	0.76	0.43	0.58					
Brand orientation				3.61*	1.03	0.795	0.89	0.68
BO1	0.72	0.49	0.51					
BO2	0.92	0.16	0.84					
BO4	0.68	0.54	0.46					
BO5	0.97	0.11	0.94					
innovation orientation				3.96*	0.85	0.778	0.75	0.55
IO3	0.72	0.52	0.49					
IO4	0.68	0.54	0.46					
IO5	0.83	0.30	0.65					
marketing communication orientation				3.64*	0.79	0.867	0.87	0.58
IMC2	0.76	0.44	0.58					
IMC3	0.70	0.52	0.49					
IMC4	0.82	0.30	0.67					
IMC5	0.87	0.27	0.75					
IMC6	0.68	0.53	0.46					
international market performance				4.09*	0.93	0.884	0.80	0.52
IMP1	0.64	0.57	0.41					
IMP2	0.69	0.53	0.48					
IMP5	0.72	0.52	0.52					
IMP6	0.82	0.30	0.67					

* The 5-point Likert scale has been used. (Strongly disagree: 1 Strongly agree: 5)

** The indicators used for measuring the IMO latent variable have been evaluated through reverse coding.

According to Table-3, the EV latent variable can be measured effectively through 5 indicators. The most effective ones of these indicators are EV1 (“It is needed to gain long years of experience in order to break into foreign markets”, 0.85) and EV3 (“It is like a dangerous adventure to try breaking into foreign markets”, 0.85). The IMO latent variable is measured through 5 indicators among which the strongest one is IMO3 (“There is no need for our firm to have settled written targets as part of international marketing”, 0.89). The BO latent variable is measured through 4 indicators among which the strongest ones are BO5 (“Quality is particularly of top priority for international markets”, 0.97) and BO2 (“We buy consultancy service for branding in international markets”, 0.92).

Considering the standardized loads, the IO variable is measured through 3 indicators among which the strongest one is IO5 (“We constantly renovate the processes in the firm for market success”, 0.81). According to the statistical results in Table-3, the IMC latent variable is measured through 5 indicators among which the strongest ones are IMC5 (“Our firm has a multilingual web page”, 0.85) and IMC4 (“We prepare catalogues in several languages”, 0.82). The IMP variable, the basic dependent variable of the research, is measured through 4 indicators among which the strongest one is IMP6 (“The ratio of foreign sales to total sales has been increasing for the last 3 years”, 0.82). When the average values of the basic variables in the research model are reviewed, it is seen that the highest average value belongs to the IMO variable (avg: 4.36; st.sp: 0.98). This shows that the SMEs in the sampling group are aware of the superiorities of international marketing. Considering the mentioned average value in terms of the target success in international marketing, it is possible to assert that the SMEs in the sampling have also failed to give a powerful positive signal in this regard.

4.2. Structural Model and Hypotheses

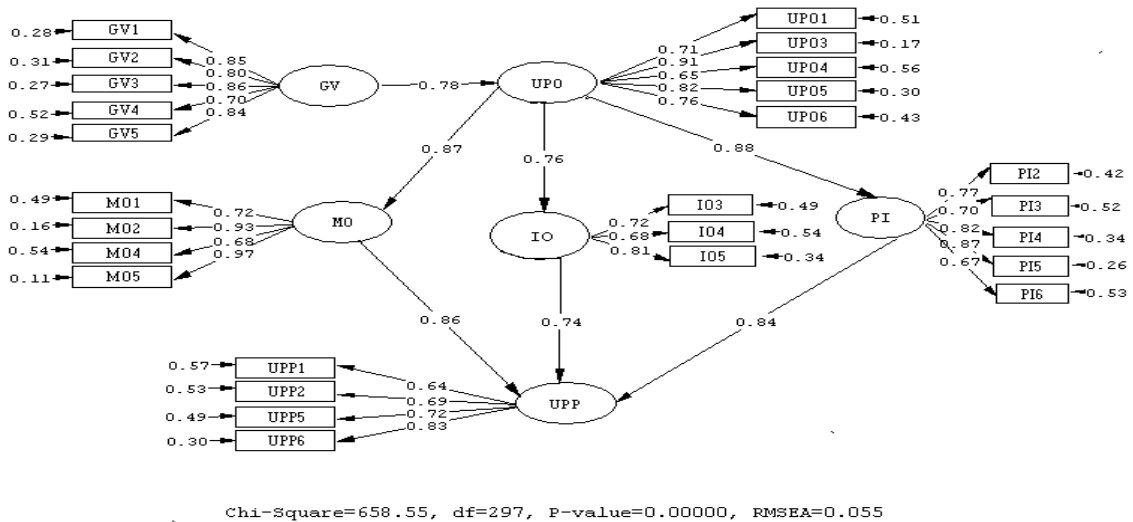
It is pertinent to remember that the confirmatory factor analysis displays the results related to the validity and credibility of the factors. The question as to whether the hypothetical tracks between the latent variables in the research model are supported by the data acquired by field research brings up the hypothesis tests on the structural model. It is necessary to examine the parameter estimation and statistical significance of each track in order to test whether the 7 hypotheses developed within the framework of this study are statistically accepted or not. The theoretical accuracy of the model has been investigated through structural equation modeling (SEM) with the purpose of determining the internal relations of the research model after the confirmatory factor analysis.

Table-4: Results of General Structural Equation Model for Research Model

Hypothesis	Causal Path	Path Coefficient	t-value	R ²	Result
H1	EV → IMO	0.78	11.63	0.61	Supported
H2	IMO → BO	0.87	18.13	0.76	Supported
H3	IMO → IO	0.88	18.86	0.77	Supported
H4	IMO → IMC	0.76	10.87	0.58	Supported
H5	IMC → IMP	0.84	15.67	0.71	Supported
H6	IO → IMP	0.74	09.38	0.55	Supported
H7	BO → IMP	0.86	16.37	0.74	Supported

The findings demonstrate that the entrepreneurial vision, international marketing-oriented awareness and focusing levels of SMEs are effective on their international market performance.

Figure-2: Structural Equation Model as to Research Model



CONCLUSION

SMEs are market players which represent the most populous group of actors in the Turkish economy. Within this context, the market performances of SMEs have a vital importance for the whole national economy. This study examines the role of the marketing competencies of SMEs in their international market performance. The research question of this study is basically which factors develop marketing competencies in the international marketing process and how these competencies reflect on market performance. Within the framework of this research, the relationship between the marketing competencies of SMEs and their entrepreneurial vision (EV) & international marketing-oriented awareness (IMO) has been probed. The entrepreneurial vision of firms expresses a mind map revealing their entrepreneurship, differently from their actual entrepreneurship.

When the relationship between marketing competencies and IMO is analyzed, it is deduced that IMO holds a highly determinative power in revealing marketing competencies. When taking into account the importance of marketing competencies of firms in terms of competitiveness and customer satisfaction, it is essential to primarily focus on IMO in order to develop these competencies at the highest level. Both state institutions and sectoral umbrella organizations should undertake responsibility on this point. In the event that SMEs attach priority to international marketing among their activities, marketing competencies emerge as a consequence of IMO. In other words, it is not possible for international marketing competencies to develop without IMO. Marketing competencies are strongly determinative on international market performance (IMP). Specifically, brand orientation and designing the process of marketing communication strongly affect the international market performance of SMEs. In this sense, while discussing the achievements or failures of SMEs in international marketing, the level of SMEs' marketing competencies should definitely be taken into consideration.

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