

Xuan, Dao Mai; Tan, Buu Le

## Article

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*Suggested Citation:* Xuan, Dao Mai; Tan, Buu Le (2024) : Relationship among government export support, perceived export stimuli, barriers and export performance, Cogent Business & Management, ISSN 2331-1975, Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, Vol. 11, Iss. 1, pp. 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2336646>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/326215>

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To cite this article: Dao Mai Xuan & Buu Le Tan (2024) Relationship among government export support, perceived export stimuli, barriers and export performance, Cogent Business & Management, 11:1, 2336646, DOI: [10.1080/23311975.2024.2336646](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2336646)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2336646>



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# Relationship among government export support, perceived export stimuli, barriers and export performance

Dao Mai Xuan<sup>a</sup> and Buu Le Tan<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Commerce at University of Finance – Marketing, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; <sup>b</sup>School of International Business and Marketing at UEH University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

## ABSTRACT

An increase in Vietnamese agricultural export performance can contribute to the decrease in trade deficit with ASEAN + 3. In order to achieve it, some factors affecting export performance should be studied. The research model is proposed to indicate the direct relationship between government support and export performance and the indirect relationship between government support and export performance through perceived export stimuli and perceived export barriers. Smart-PLS software was used to test the collected data from 257 SMEs exporting agricultural products to ASEAN + 3. Findings show that there is not only a direct effect of government export support on export performance but also an indirect effect through perceived internal export stimuli. Besides, there is an indirect relationship between government support and perceived internal export barriers through perceived internal and external export stimuli. Based on findings, the research draws key implications for managers and policymakers. However, because of difficulty to approach SMEs' managers, the research has some limitations including sample size and sample taking method (convenience and snowball).

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 May 2023  
Revised 19 February 2024  
Accepted 25 March 2024

## KEYWORDS

ASEAN + 3; export performance; government support programs; perceived export barriers; perceived export stimuli; SMEs

## REVIEW EDITOR

Huifen (Helen) Cai,  
Middlesex University  
Business School, United  
Kingdom

## SUBJECTS

Asian Studies; Economics;  
Business, Management  
and Accounting

## JEL CODE

P33

## 1. Introduction

Since 2012, Vietnam has shifted from a trade deficit to a trade surplus. However, Vietnam has a negative trade balance with some markets, especially ASEAN + 3 (ASEAN, Japan, Korea, China) at about 65 billion USD in the recent five years (Authors calculated based on the Customs statistics from 2017 to 2021). Besides, as an agricultural country, agricultural products are Vietnamese traditional exports. With an average export value share of more than 40% per year, ASEAN + 3 are the main Vietnams' export markets. The problem of trade deficit with ASEAN + 3 can be solved by boosting agricultural exports to this market group. In addition, the increase in ASEAN + 3 export also creates jobs for the majority of the population and is suitable for SMEs with limited resources which have difficulties to export to far distance markets, such as EU or America. Therefore, it is necessary to understand which perceived export stimuli encourage and which perceived export barriers hinder SMEs' export performance to ASEAN + 3. In addition, Vietnamese SMEs have internal and external difficulties, such as lacking of capital, outdated technology, low production capacity, big inventories, weak international competitiveness, so government export support programs are needed for them. Whether firms appreciate the benefits of government export support in export stimuli increase, export barriers decrease, affecting export performance or not, should also be studied.

An extensive search of the literature reveals that there are three mainstreams studying on perceived export stimuli and perceived export barriers. The first stream is the studies on the effect of perceived export stimuli on export performance (Pett et al., 2004; Boubakri et al., 2013; Hemmati et al., 2018). The second stream is the studies on the effect of perceived export barriers on export performance (Al-Hyari

et al., 2012; Jalali, 2012; Ai et al., 2015). The third stream is the studies on the effect of perceived export stimuli and perceived export barriers on export performance (Haghighi et al., 2008; Stoian, 2010; Gilaninia et al., 2013; Anil et al., 2016). In term of the study on the government support, there have not been many studies on the direct and indirect relationship between government export support and export performance. Related to indirect relationship, perceived export barrier is the mediator variable just was studied by Karakaya and Yannopoulos (2012) and there have not been any studies of perceived export stimuli as mediator variable. While one of the mainstreams of perceived export stimuli and perceived export barriers is the study on joint effect of perceived export stimuli and perceived export barriers on export performance, the extant studies have not yet tested the indirect relationship between government export support and export performance with the mediator variable of the combination of perceived export stimuli and perceived export barriers. In addition, the previous studies showed the effect of perceived export stimuli on export performance (Pett et al., 2004; Boubakri et al., 2013; Hemmati et al., 2018) but the effect of perceived export stimuli on perceived export barriers and the effect of perceived export stimuli on export performance through perceived export barriers have not been tested yes. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on SMEs exporting agricultural products in a developing country, with a transitional economy as Vietnam. Taking into account the above mentioned, there is a certain need to conduct this research to fill the research gap. This research objective is to investigate the relationship among government export support, perceived internal export stimuli, perceived external export stimuli, perceived internal export barriers, perceived external export barriers and export performance in order to suggest some managerial and policy implications to boost the agricultural exports to ASEAN + 3. The data was collected from 257 directors/deputy directors, chief/deputy export sales managers or staff who have more than 5 years of working experience in SMEs exporting agricultural products directly to ASEAN + 3. In the next section, rationale for the constructs and their hypothesized interrelationships are presented. Then a detailed description of the research method and measures are provided. After reporting the study results, the article will conclude with some managerial and policy implications, its limitations and future research needs.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1. Theoretical background

According to Barney's RBV theory (1991), enterprises should assess whether their resources are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and non-substitutable or not. If resources are well exploited, enterprises will increase their competitive advantage and performance. Enterprises perceive that their own resources can create internal stimuli or internal barriers to export. Anil et al. (2016) believe that enterprise resources are factors affecting their export performance. Therefore, RBV theory shows that good export performance is based only on valuable, rare, difficult internal resources to imitate and to non-substitute. If an enterprise possesses unique resources, it will perceive this as internal export stimuli to achieve better performance. On the contrary, if an enterprise does not possess unique resources, internal barriers can be perceived that adversely affect its export performance. In addition, because of limited resources, SMEs need government support. Government support does not only affect export performance directly, but also indirectly (Katsikeas et al., 1996; Gençtürk & Kotabe, 2001) because it helps to supplement and increase enterprise's limited resources.

According to Lawrence and Lorsch's contingency theory (1967), SMEs internationalization behavior is dynamic and diverse because it mostly depends on the enterprise's capabilities and on the external environment. Sousa et al. (2008); Nemkova et al. (2012) argued that external factors are mentioned by the approach of the contingency theory and according to which the external environmental factors influence the strategy and enterprise performance. External factors in export activities are specific external environmental factors that are beyond enterprise's control such as characteristics of the export markets, political factors, legal factors, cultural factors, supports from the host government (Katsikeas, 2014). The favorable external environmental factors will be perceived as external export stimuli and the adverse external environmental factors will be perceived as external export

barriers. The perception of these external export stimuli and barriers affects enterprise's export performance.

Institutional theory (Scott, 1995) shows that government support is considered as formal institutions or regulations to guide enterprises, provide knowledge and experience, reduce uncertainties to achieve good performance. Bruton et al. (2010) also argued that government support helps to remove export barriers. Boehe et al. (2016) indicated that institutions play an important role in reducing uncertainties and providing supports and guidance to enterprises. These supports and guidance encourage businesses to learn, improve and adapt to challenges. Cardoza et al. (2016), Narooz and Child (2017) also showed that the lack of government support increases uncertainty and transaction costs for SMEs in developing countries. Therefore, the government export support has a direct effect on enterprise's export performance as well as the indirect effect on the increase in perceived export stimuli and the decrease in perceived export barriers.

## **2.2. Perceived export stimuli**

Perceived export stimuli are the enterprise perception of the factors that influence an enterprise's decision to initiate, continue, or develop exports (Leonidou, 1995a & Morgan, 1997). There is a wide array of export stimuli which can be classified as perceived internal and external export stimuli (Leonidou, 1995a; Navarro-García, 2016); proactive and reactive export stimuli (Leonidou et al., 1998; Katsikeas et al., 1996; Pett et al., 2004); export stimuli based on export period (Revindo & Gan 2017). This research approaches the classification of internal stimuli and external stimuli (Leonidou, 1995a). Internal stimuli are associated with influences endogenous to firms (e.g. accumulation of unsold inventory, desire for extra corporate growth, possession of a unique product), while external stimuli are derived from the environment in which firms operate or intend to operate (e.g. unsolicited orders from abroad, favourable exchange rates, encouragement by government agencies) (Leonidou, 1995a; Leonidou et al., 2007).

## **2.3. Perceived export barriers**

Perceived export barriers are the enterprise perception of constraints that may hinder or prevent exporting, or block and discourage firm from initiating, increasing or maintaining export (Arteaga-Ortiz & Fernández-Ortiz, 2010; Leonidou, 1995b). There is also a wide array of export barriers which can be classified as initial and ongoing barriers (Bilkey & Tesar, 1977); perceived internal and external export barriers (Cavusgil, 1984; Leonidou, 1995b); barriers from regular and sporadic exporters (Kaleka & Katsikeas, 1995). This research approaches the classification of internal barriers and external barriers (Leonidou, 1995b). Internal barriers are defined as firm's endogenous problems associated with a lack of organisational resources, while external barriers are more diverse and relate to issues in firms' external environment including problems in both home and host markets (Tesfom & Lutz, 2006). Internal barriers include informational, functional, financial and marketing barriers while external barriers include procedural, governmental, task and environmental barriers (Narayanan, 2015).

## **2.4. Government export support**

Government export support is programs with the purpose of creating export understanding, encouraging and reducing export barriers for enterprises (Seringhaus & Rosson, 1990). There are many kinds of export support programs. According to Gençtürk and Kotabe (2001), Ali and Shamsuddoha (2007), Durmuşoğlu et al. (2012); Faroque and Takahashi (2015), government support programs are listed as specific programs, such as technical assistance for developing new products, participation in international trade fairs and specialised export fairs, export workshops and seminars, assistance for establishing sales and display centres abroad. Ali and Shamsuddoha (2007) categorised export government support as market support and financial support. Leonidou (1998) studied higher-order construct of government support with lower constructs of information-related programs, education-and training-related programs, trade mobility-related programs and financial aid-related programs. Government support also is divided

into financial support and non-financial support (Ayob & Freixanet, 2014). This research's approach is based on Leonidou (1998) because the classification is quite clear, fully showing the kinds of government support programs.

### **2.5. Export performance and hypotheses**

According to Papadopoulos and Martín (2010), Chen et al. (2016), export performance is the enterprise results in international market. Export performance can be measured in three methods, including financial (objective) scale (Jalali, 2012; Katsikeas et al., 2000; Zou & Stan, 1998), non-financial (subjective) scale (Jalali, 2012; Sousa, 2004; Zou & Stan, 1998), the combination of financial and non-financial scales or the combination of objective and subjective scales (Katsikeas et al., 2000). While financial scale measures the revenue, profit, market share, non-financial scale indicates products, markets, satisfaction (Zou & Stan, 1998; Katsikeas et al., 2000). The combination scale is assessed through the perception or satisfaction of export activities (Katsikeas et al., 2000; Lages & Lages, 2003). Because enterprises do not like to disclose information with specific data on their business performance, this research approaches non-financial or subjective scale based on enterprise satisfaction on export performance.

While some studies show a positive effect of perceived export stimuli on export performance and a negative effect of perceived export barriers on export performance (Boubakri et al., 2013; Hemmati et al., 2018; Gerschewski et al., 2020), others demonstrate opposite results (Pett et al., 2004) or non-significant impact (Boubakri et al., 2013). Several studies related to the direct effect of government export support on export performance have showed mixed results of either positive or non-significance impact. In the indirect relationship between export support and export performance, studies show a variety of mediator variables, in which, the perceived export stimuli have not been studied, the perceived export barriers just were studied by Karakaya and Yannopoulos (2012).

Leonidou (1998) also believe that participating in government export support programs helps enterprises to increase their perception of profits obtained from their exports. The purpose of government support programs is to create a more positive business owners attitude about profit opportunities, growth in foreign markets (Leonidou et al., 1998), accumulation of positive attitudes towards the export (Ali & Shamsuddoha, 2007). Several studies proved that the government export support helps to increase enterprise resources then leads to the increase in their perception of export stimuli (Czinkota, 1994; Leonidou 1998; Njinyah, 2017). According to Czinkota (1994), market information support helps to increase the enterprise perception of internal stimuli for revenue and profit, helping enterprises to make adjustments to products which are more suitable for their export markets. Positive information on export markets, favorable policies in export markets also help increase the impact of enterprise's perceived external export stimuli. Supporting enterprises to participate in exhibitions and trade fairs also helps to provide knowledge and information for businesses, increasing perception of internal export stimuli and also external export stimuli for market opportunities, export products (Seringshaus & Rosson, 1990). Financial support increases the perception of profit stimuli (Czinkota, 1994) as well as the perception of external export stimuli in foreign markets. Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses should be tested:

H1a: There is a positive relationship between government export support and perceived internal export stimuli

H1b: There is a positive relationship between government export support and perceived external export stimuli

According to Singer and Czinkota (1994), Leonidou (1998), government support programs directly reduce the impact of export barriers, helping enterprises boost their operations to achieve superior export performance. Lederman et al. (2016); Kanda et al. (2016) argued that SMEs may appreciate the risks associated with their performance in export markets which can hinder their market penetration. Therefore, government support help to minimize the adverse effects from the external environment and reduce failures in the export markets (Kanda et al., 2016). According to Shamsuddoha et al. (2009), government support programs provide information and knowledge through fairs, seminars, etc. to help reduce perceived internal barriers related to information and limited knowledge. This kind of support programs also help reduce the perception of export procedures and regulations which are external

barriers (Leonidou 1998). Köhr et al. (2018)'s research also showed that a high perception of barriers can hinder enterprises from expanding their operations abroad, but if they are provided with knowledge, information and advice, enterprises can overcome export barriers. Therefore, the following hypotheses should be tested:

H2a: There is a negative relationship between government export support and perceived internal export barriers

H2b: There is a negative relationship between government export support and perceived external export barriers

The instrumental role of government export support in helping firms boost their exports has been proved in several studies (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2012; Leonidou 1998; Singer & Czinkota, 1994). Singer and Czinkota (1994) showed that information and knowledge about export markets supplied by support programs can promote managers to have a positive attitude towards export performance. Wilkinson and Brouthers (2006) also believed that attending exhibitions, trade fairs and seminars helps enterprises increase their activities in less experienced markets. Durmuşoğlu et al. (2012) mentioned that export support is the main factor that positively affects export performance and helps to encourage enterprises to promote their performance to new markets. Recently, Myint (2019) also showed that there is a positive relationship between financial and technical support and export performance when making the research on garment enterprises in Myanmar. Therefore, the following hypothesis was tested in this study:

H3: There is a positive relationship between government export support and export performance

Exporters do business because of export motives related to revenue, profit and growth which also contribute positively to firm performance (Gray, 1997; Stoian et al., 2011). However, the extent to which firms are motivated to export to achieve revenue and profit goals is related to managers' perception of export markets (Leonidou et al., 2007). Perception of the similarity between home and host markets can determine enterprise export behavior and as a result, it affects firm export performance (Stoian et al., 2011). According to Sousa et al. (2008), the market similarities are an important determinant of export performance. The similarities between home and host markets are easier for enterprises to control than the differences of those. Therefore, there is a success increase in close distance markets. In addition, the perception of the positive information about the market, the demand and the attractiveness of the export markets play an important role in expanding the export markets, leading to firm successful performance (Diamantopoulos & Souchon, 1999; Souchon & Diamantopoulos, 1996). Environmental factors are those from home environment, including export stimuli such as favorable export exchange rates, the supports from the government, banks and industry which also affect export performance (Leonidou et al., 2007). Several empirical studies have showed that both perceived internal export stimuli and external export stimuli have positive effects on export performance (Anil et al., 2016; Haghghi et al., 2008). This leads to the following hypotheses to be tested:

H4a: There is a positive relationship between perceived internal export stimuli and export performance

H4b: There is a positive relationship between perceived external export stimuli and export performance

Adverse environmental factors are perceived by enterprises as export barriers, affecting the export performance. The more barriers are perceived, the more enterprises realize that export barriers have negative effects on export performance. This is because perceived export barriers lead to a negative attitude towards export performance (Dean et al., 2000). Perceived barriers limit the enterprises' ability to seek, identify and exploit export opportunities effectively. Therefore, it leads to dissatisfaction with export performance (Katsikeas et al., 1996). Most studies confirm that management perceptions of export barriers negatively affect export performance (Zou & Stan, 1998) and this has been proved in many studies such as Da Silva and Da Rocha (2001); Wilkinson and Brouthers (2006); Al-Hyari et al. (2012); Boermans and Roelfsema (2013); Sinkovics et al. (2018); Yong et al. (2018). Therefore, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H5a: There is a negative relationship between perceived internal export barriers and export performance

H5b: There is a negative relationship between perceived external export barriers and export performance

Kahiya (2016) suggested that some extant studies on export barriers focus on external stimuli (such as export support programs) as a method to deal with export barriers. Because external stimuli can lead to the increase in internal resources that firms can break down barriers. With internal resource increase, SMEs will perceive it as internal stimuli. Gerschewski et al. (2020) indicated the effect of internal export stimuli on export readiness which includes the readiness to face export barriers. Carrillo-Labela et al. (2020) also mentioned that motivational factors (such as some norms, standards) help to overcome barriers. In addition, in interviews with some directors, they agreed that perceived internal, external export stimuli have the effects on perceived internal, external export barriers. The reason is that when enterprises have their positive perception of internal resources, enterprises can overcome internal barriers as well as external barriers. Similarly, when enterprises have a positive perception of their stimuli to domestic environment and export markets, they are motivated to overcome internal and external difficulties and barriers. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6a: There is a negative relationship between perceived internal export stimuli and internal export barriers

H6b: There is a negative relationship between perceived internal export stimuli and external export barriers

H6c: There is a negative relationship between perceived external export stimuli and internal export barriers

H6d: There is a negative relationship between perceived external export stimuli and external export barriers

The proposed research model with hypotheses is showed in [Figure 1](#).

### 3. Research methodology

This study combines qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative research was conducted through face-to-face interviews and a focus group to adjust the observational variables to be suitable for the research context in Vietnam. First, drawing on literature review, a preliminary version of the questionnaire was developed. Government support programs are second order construct comprising four first-order factors: Information-related programs, Education and training-related programs, Trade mobility-related programs and Financial aid-related programs (Leonidou 1998). Perceived internal export stimuli, perceived external export stimuli, perceived internal export barriers, perceived external export barriers are first-order constructs. They are synthesized from previous studies (Da Silva & Da Rocha, 2001; El Makrini, 2015; Kahiya, 2016; Katsikeas et al., 1996; Leonidou, 1995a, 1995b, 2000, 2004). Export performance is dependable variable which is first-order construct drawing from Katsikeas et al. (1996)'s research. The subjective scale of export performance is used in this study. Second, face-to-face interviews were implemented with 5 enterprise representatives who are senior executives in agricultural export SMEs, 4 scientists who are lecturers teaching the courses of international trade and 4 state management agency representatives whose duties relate to government support programs. Third, the focus group was set up with 5 enterprise representatives. After the step of face-to-face interviews and focus group, some observational items of research constructs were suggested to add or remove to be suitable for the research context. There are 16 items in total for the construct of government support programs. There are 6 items for the construct of perceived internal export stimuli; 7 items for the construct of perceived external export stimuli; 7 items for the construct of perceived internal export barriers; 11 items for the construct of perceived external export barriers and 3 items for the construct of export performance.

Quantitative research was conducted through Smart-PLS software with 257 SMEs surveyed for the evaluation of measurement model and structural model. Sample taking methods of convenience and snowball were applied because it was not easy to approach the board of management in SMEs. All respondents are in senior positions or have more than 5 years working in their businesses. Because these respondents are involved in important export decision-making or have a lot of working experience, the reliability of the provided information is ensured. Respondents were asked to indicate the benefit level of the government support programs, the level of consensus on perceived internal export stimuli, perceived external export stimuli, perceived internal export barriers, perceived external export stimuli and the satisfaction level of export performance when enterprises export agricultural products to one of their selected markets in ASEAN + 3. A five-point scale was used to evaluate each item level of all constructs (1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree).

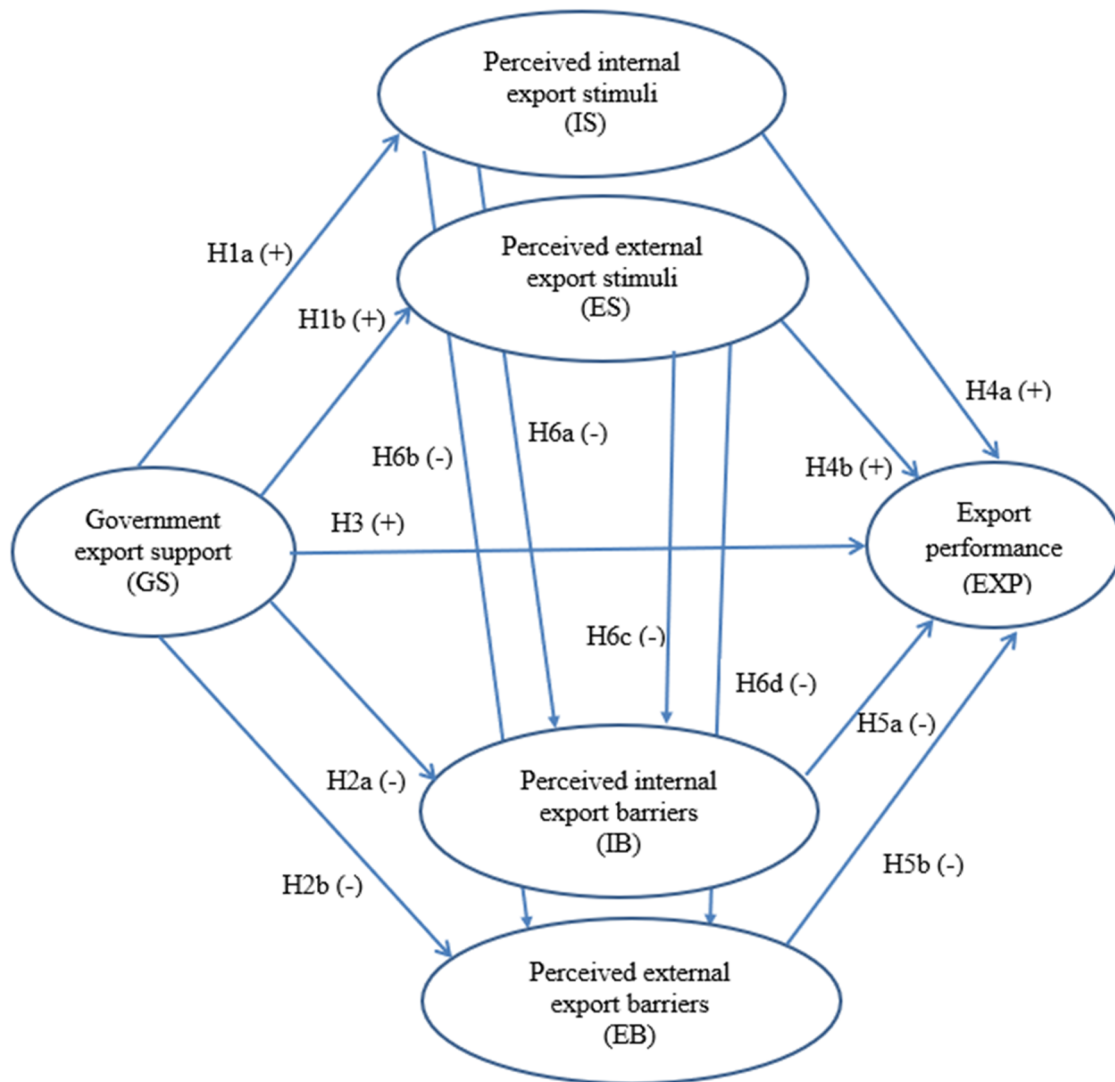


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

## 4. Results

The characteristics of research samples is showed in Table 1. Most SMEs respondents are in the South of Vietnam, with 61%. The highest percentage of firm size is SMEs with below 50 employees, taking account of 69%. China is the market to which most of SMEs export their agricultural products, occupying 43%. It shows that the survey sample's characteristics are consistent with the reality in Vietnam when the South is the area in where the most agricultural exporting enterprises are, small enterprises account for the majority among all sizes enterprises and the Vietnam's biggest agricultural export market is China.

### 4.1. Evaluation of the measurement model

According to Hair (2017), there are three criteria to evaluate the reflective measurement model, including internal consistency (cronbach's alpha, composite reliability), convergent validity (outer loading, average variance extracted) and discriminant validity. Higher-order component (GS) includes lower-order component: IP, EP, TP, FP which satisfy the reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. Higher-order component (GS) with the remaining constructs in the model IS, EXP satisfy the reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. ES, IB, EB have not yet met convergent validity. In order to meet the

**Table 1.** Characteristics of research samples.

|   | Characteristics                | Number of respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Area  | North                          | 39                    | 15             |
|   | Centre and Highland            | 62                    | 24             |
|   | South                          | 156                   | 61             |
| Firm size (Number of employees)                       | Below 50                       | 178                   | 69             |
|   | From and above 50 to below 100 | 60                    | 23             |
|   | From 100 to below 200          | 19                    | 8              |
| Export market selected to answer the survey questions | ASEAN                          | 101                   | 39             |
|   | Korea                          | 24                    | 10             |
|   | Japan                          | 21                    | 8              |
|   | China                          | 111                   | 43             |

standard, the following items should be removed, including ES3, ES6, ES7, IB5, EB2 and EB9. The result of evaluation of the measurement model is showed in [Table 2](#) and [Table 3](#).

#### 4.2. Evaluation of structural model

According to Hair (2017), the criteria for assessing the structural model in PLS-SEM are (1) collinearity assessment; (2) the significance of the path coefficients; (3) the level of the  $R^2$  values; (4) the  $f^2$  effect; (5) the predictive relevance  $Q^2$ ; (6) the  $q^2$  effect size.

1. Collinearity assessment: The result of collinearity statistics (VIF) values is less than 5.0, so with this figure, the estimated structure model does not have collinearity (Hair et al., 2017).
2. Structural model path coefficients:

##### Direct effects

The result of direct effects is showed in [Table 4](#). There are positive relationships between GS and IS; GS and ES ( $p=0.000$ ), so H1a and H1b are accepted. There are positive relationships between GS and IB ( $p=0.001$ ), and GS with EB ( $p=0.018$ ), but the signs of these two relationships are positive, contrary to the hypotheses, so H2a and H2b are rejected. There exists a relationship between GS and EXP ( $p=0.000$ ), so H3 is accepted. There exists a relationship between IS and EXP ( $p=0.000$ ), so H4a is accepted. There is no relationship between ES and EXP, IB and EXP, EB and EXP, so H4b, H5a, H5b are rejected. Regarding the relationships among perceived export stimuli and perceived export barriers, H6a and H6c are accepted, H6b and H6d are rejected.

##### Indirect effects

The result of indirect effects is showed in [Table 5](#). There exists an indirect effect between GS and EXP through IS with  $\beta=0.104$  and a total indirect effect between GS and EXP with  $\beta=0.106$ . There is no indirect effect between GS and EXP through ES, IB and EB. In addition, there are indirect relationships between GS and IB through IS with  $\beta=-0.078$ ; GS and IB via ES with  $\beta=-0.059$  and the total indirect effect between GS and IB through IS and ES with  $\beta=-0.137$  [Figure 2](#).

3. Coefficient of determination  $R^2$  and  $R^2_{adj}$ :

This coefficient is a measure of the model's predictive power. The coefficient represents the exogenous latent variables' combined effects on the endogenous latent variable. That is, the coefficient represents the amount of variance in the endogenous constructs explained by all of the exogenous constructs linked to it (Hair et al., 2017). The  $R^2$  value ranges from 0 to 1, with higher levels indicating higher levels of predictive accuracy. It is difficult to provide rules of thumb for acceptable  $R^2$  values as this depends on the model complexity and the research discipline. This study result shows that  $R^2 = 0,31$  which means that the exogenous latent variables' combined effects of GS, IS, ES, IB, EB on the endogenous latent variable of EXP is 31%.

4. Effect size  $f^2$ :

The change in the  $R^2$  value when a specified exogenous construct is omitted from the model can be used to evaluate whether the omitted construct has a substantive impact on the endogenous constructs

**Table 2.** Evaluation of internal consistency and convergent validity.

|   | Constructs | Internal consistency   |                       | Convergent validity |  |       |       |
|---|------------|--|-----------------------|---------------------|--|-------|-------|
|   |            | Cronbach's alpha   | Composite reliability | Outer loading       | Average variance extracted (AVE)         |       |       |
| GS (Government export support)          | IP         | Information-related programs   | 0.966                 | 0.969               | 0.921                                    | 0.662 |       |
|   | EP         |  |                       |                     | Education- and training-related programs |       | 0.906 |
|   | TP         |  |                       |                     | Trade mobility-related programs          |       | 0.963 |
|   | FP         |  |                       |                     | Financial aid-related Programs           |       | 0.879 |
| IS (Perceived internal export stimuli)  | IS1        | Special managerial interest/urge to penetrate X market   | 0.833                 | 0.877               | 0.733                                    | 0.544 |       |
|   | IS2        | Utilization of special managerial talent   |                       |                     | 0.7                                      |       |       |
|   | IS3        | Products meet X market demand  |                       |                     | 0.736                                    |       |       |
|   | IS4        | Potential for extra sales/profits from exporting to X  |                       |                     | 0.781                                    |       |       |
|   | IS5        | Potential for extra growth from exporting to X   |                       |                     | 0.777                                    |       |       |
|   | IS6        | Close relationship in business   |                       |                     | 0.693                                    |       |       |
| ES (Perceived external export stimuli)  | ES1        | High demand in X market  | 0.688                 | 0.81                | 0.636                                    | 0.518 |       |
|   | ES2        | Stable politics in X market  |                       |                     | 0.734                                    |       |       |
|   | ES4        | Close distance to X market   |                       |                     | 0.702                                    |       |       |
|   | ES5        | X market culture is similar to Vietnamese culture  |                       |                     | 0.796                                    |       |       |
|   | ES5        | X market culture is similar to Vietnamese culture  |                       |                     | 0.796                                    |       |       |
| IB (Perceived internal export barriers) | IB1        | Lack of experience/knowledge in X market   | 0.825                 | 0.873               | 0.849                                    | 0.541 |       |
|   | IB2        | Inadequate/untrained personnel for exporting   |                       |                     | 0.782                                    |       |       |
|   | IB3        | Limited working capital to support exports   |                       |                     | 0.786                                    |       |       |
|   | IB4        | Gathering data/information about X market  |                       |                     | 0.818                                    |       |       |
|   | IB6        | Lack of trademark  |                       |                     | 0.623                                    |       |       |
|   | IB7        | Offering competitive prices in X market  |                       |                     | 0.492                                    |       |       |
|   | IB7        | Offering competitive prices in X market  |                       |                     | 0.492                                    |       |       |
| EB (Perceived external export barriers) | EB1        | Lacking of vertical link in agricultural value chain   | 0.88                  | 0.903               | 0.64                                     | 0.513 |       |
|   | EB3        | High domestic production - export costs (raw materials, space rental, electricity, water, gasoline, traffic jams, logistics, storage...) |                       |                     | 0.763                                    |       |       |
|   | EB4        | Informal costs (Corruption) in home country  |                       |                     | 0.794                                    |       |       |
|   | EB5        | Lack of efficient home government export assistance/incentives   |                       |                     | 0.58                                     |       |       |
|   | EB6        | Unfavorable and changeable home country's export rules and regulations   |                       |                     | 0.64                                     |       |       |
|   | EB7        | Health, safety, quality & technical standards in X market  |                       |                     | 0.803                                    |       |       |
|   | EB8        | Stiff competition in X market  |                       |                     | 0.725                                    |       |       |
|   | EB10       | The risk of being sued by the customers in X market where applies safeguard measures, anti-dumping tariff                                |                       |                     | 0.771                                    |       |       |
|   | EB11       | Intellectual property rights protection in foreign markets   |                       |                     | 0.693                                    |       |       |
|   | EB11       | Intellectual property rights protection in foreign markets   |                       |                     | 0.693                                    |       |       |

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

| Constructs               |      |   | Internal consistency |                       | Convergent validity |                                  |
|--------------------------|------|---|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
|                          |      |   | Cronbach's alpha     | Composite reliability | Outer loading       | Average variance extracted (AVE) |
| EXP (Export performance) | EXP1 | Satisfaction with export sales in 3 recent years        | 0.759                | 0.862                 | 0.827               | 0.676                            |
|                          | EXP2 | Satisfaction with export market share in 3 recent years |                      |                       | 0.870               |                                  |
|                          | EXP3 | Satisfaction with export profit in 3 recent years       |                      |                       | 0.766               |                                  |

Note. X is the export market in ASEAN + 3.

Table 3. Evaluation of discriminant validity (Fornell – Larcker criteria).

|     | EB           | ES           | EXP          | GS           | IB           | IS           |
|-----|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| EB  | <b>0.716</b> |              |              |              |              |              |
| ES  | 0.338        | <b>0.719</b> |              |              |              |              |
| EXP | 0.24         | 0.283        | <b>0.822</b> |              |              |              |
| GS  | 0.252        | 0.284        | 0.402        | <b>0.813</b> |              |              |
| IB  | 0.022        | -0.315       | -0.075       | 0.062        | <b>0.736</b> |              |
| IS  | 0.393        | 0.534        | 0.466        | 0.244        | -0.375       | <b>0.737</b> |

Table 4. Result of hypothesized relationships.

| Hypotheses | Relationship | $\beta$              | Bootstrap        | p-value | Conclusion |
|------------|--------------|----------------------|------------------|---------|------------|
| H1a (+)    | GS->IS       | 0,247***             | [0,132; 0,341]   | 0,000   | Accepted   |
| H1b (+)    | GS->ES       | 0,288***             | [0,151; 0,399]   | 0,000   | Accepted   |
| H2a (-)    | GS->IB       | 0,196                | [0,081; 0,302]   | 0,001   | Rejected   |
| H2b (-)    | GS->EB       | 0,142                | [0,022; 0,255]   | 0,018   | Rejected   |
| H3 (+)     | GS->EXP      | 0,297***             | [0,164; 0,424]   | 0,000   | Accepted   |
| H4a (+)    | IS->EXP      | 0,419***             | [0,286; 0,546]   | 0,000   | Accepted   |
| H4b (+)    | ES->EXP      | -0,007 <sup>ns</sup> | [-0,137; 0,115]  | 0,915   | Rejected   |
| H5a (-)    | IB-> EXP     | 0,062 <sup>ns</sup>  | [-0,069; 0,193]  | 0,348   | Rejected   |
| H5b (-)    | EB-> EXP     | 0,001 <sup>ns</sup>  | [-0,122; 0,12]   | 0,985   | Rejected   |
| H6a (-)    | IS->IB       | -0,314***            | [-0,419; -0,177] | 0,000   | Accepted   |
| H6b (-)    | ES->EB       | 0,28                 | [0,138; 0,413]   | 0,000   | Rejected   |
| H6c (-)    | IS->IB       | -0,204**             | [-0,325; -0,057] | 0,003   | Accepted   |
| H6d (-)    | ES->EB       | 0,148                | [-0,003; 0,271]  | 0,033   | Accepted   |

Table 5. Result of indirect relationships.

| Relationship                       | $\beta$  | Bootstrap        | p-value |
|------------------------------------|----------|------------------|---------|
| GS -> IS -> EXP                    | 0.104*** | [0.058; 0.158]   | 0.000   |
| GS -> ES -> EXP                    | -0.002   | [-0.043; 0.036]  | 0.92    |
| GS -> IB -> EXP                    | 0.012    | [-0.012; 0.046]  | 0.388   |
| GS -> EB -> EXP                    | 0        | [-0.019; 0.021]  | 0.987   |
| GS -> IS -> IB                     | -0.078** | [-0.124; -0.037] | 0.001   |
| GS -> IS -> EB                     | 0.069    | [0.03; 0.12]     | 0.003   |
| GS -> ES -> IB                     | -0.059*  | [-0.113; -0.015] | 0.021   |
| GS -> ES -> EB                     | 0.043    | [0.001; 0.086]   | 0.044   |
| IS -> IB -> EXP                    | -0.02    | [-0.066; 0.022]  | 0.383   |
| IS -> EB -> EXP                    | 0        | [-0.035; 0.037]  | 0.986   |
| ES -> IB -> EXP                    | -0.013   | [-0.05; 0.012]   | 0.398   |
| ES -> EB -> EXP                    | 0        | [-0.024; 0.02]   | 0.987   |
| GS -> IS -> IB -> EXP              | -0.005   | [-0.018; 0.005]  | 0.402   |
| GS -> IS -> EB -> EXP              | 0        | [-0.009; 0.01]   | 0.987   |
| GS -> ES -> IB -> EXP              | -0.004   | [-0.016; 0.003]  | 0.432   |
| GS -> ES -> EB -> EXP              | 0        | [-0.007; 0.006]  | 0.988   |
| GS-> EXP (total indirect effects)  | 0.106**  | [0.043; 0.166]   | 0.001   |
| IS -> EXP (total indirect effects) | -0.019   | [-0.083; 0.036]  | 0.521   |
| ES -> EXP (total indirect effects) | -0.013   | [-0.051; 0.023]  | 0.5     |
| GS -> IB (total indirect effects)  | -0.137** | [-0.203; -0.072] | 0.000   |
| GS -> EB (total indirect effects)  | 0.112    | [0.058; 0.168]   | 0.000   |

(Hair et al., 2017). Guidelines for assessing  $f^2$  are those values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, respectively, represent small, medium, and large effects of the exogenous latent variable (Cohen, 1988). This study result shows that there are no effects of ES, IB, EB on EXP ( $f^2_{ES \rightarrow EXP} = 0,000$ ;  $f^2_{IB \rightarrow EXP} = 0,004$ ;  $f^2_{EB \rightarrow EXP} = 0,000$ ), small effect of

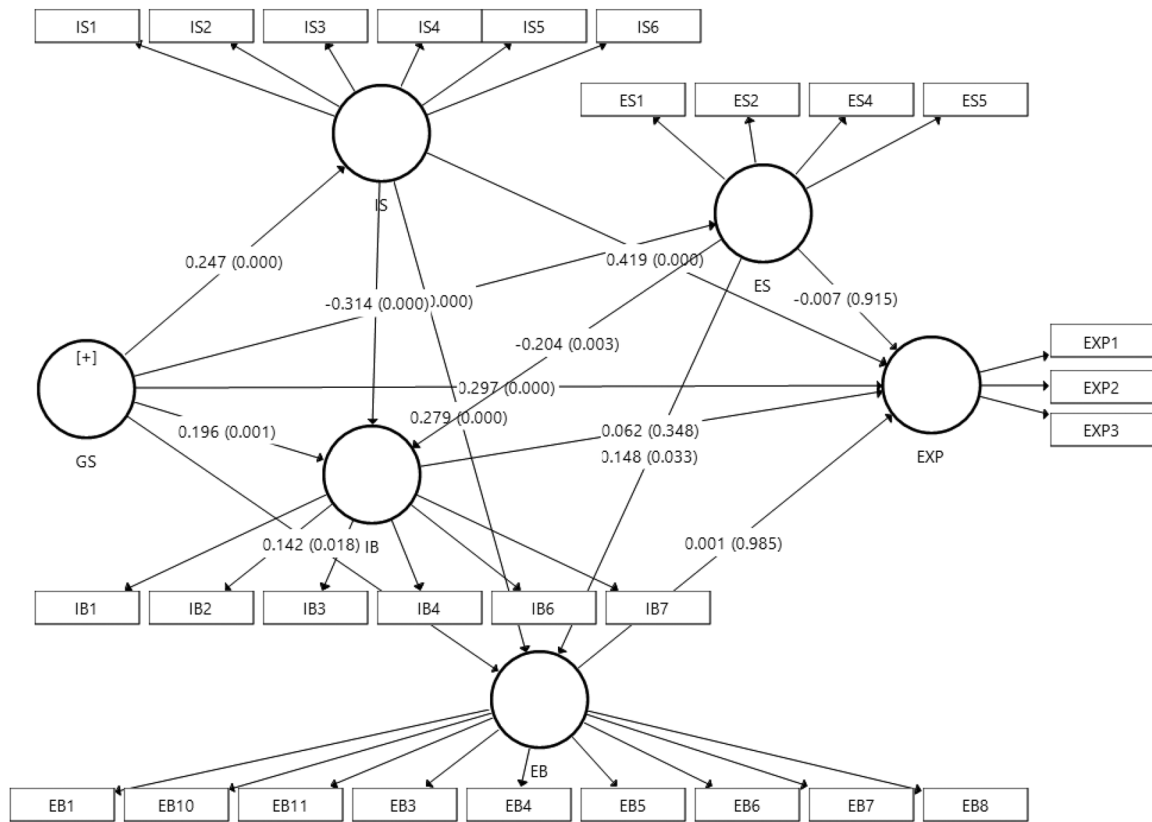


Figure 2. Result of structural model.

GS on IB, EB ( $f^2_{GS \rightarrow IB} = 0,043$ ;  $f^2_{GS \rightarrow EB} = 0,023$ ); ES on IB, EB; moderate effect of GS on IS, ES, EXP ( $f^2_{GS \rightarrow IS} = 0,065$ ;  $f^2_{GS \rightarrow ES} = 0,091$ ,  $f^2_{GS \rightarrow EXP} = 0,109$ ); IS on IB, EB and EXP ( $f^2_{IS \rightarrow IB} = 0,086$ ;  $f^2_{IS \rightarrow EB} = 0,065$ ;  $f^2_{IS \rightarrow EXP} = 0,152$ ).

##### 5. Blindfolding and Predictive relevance $Q^2$ :

In addition to evaluating the magnitude of  $R^2$  values as a criterion of predictive accuracy, researchers should also examine Stone-Geisser's  $Q^2$  value (Geisser, 1974). This measure is an indicator of the model's out-of-sample predictive power or predictive relevance.  $Q^2$  values larger than 0 suggest that the model has predictive relevance for a certain endogenous construct. This study's result shows that  $Q^2$  of IS, ES, GS, IB, EB, and EXP are all greater than 0 indicating the model has predictive relevance for the endogenous construct of EXP.

##### 6. Effect size $q^2$ :

Similar to the  $f^2$  effect size approach for assessing  $R^2$  values, the relative impact of predictive relevance can be compared by means of the measure to the  $q^2$  effect size.  $q^2$  values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, respectively, indicate that an exogenous construct has a small, medium, or large predictive relevance for a certain endogenous construct (Hair et al., 2017). This study's result shows that  $q^2$  effect of GS on IS, ES, IB, EB are small ( $q^2_{GS \rightarrow IS} = 0,031$ ;  $q^2_{GS \rightarrow ES} = 0,041$ ;  $q^2_{GS \rightarrow IB} = 0,02$ ;  $q^2_{GS \rightarrow EB} = 0,0055$ ); GS on EXP, IS on EXP are nearly moderate ( $q^2_{GS \rightarrow EXP} = 0,06$ ;  $q^2_{IS \rightarrow EXP} = 0,084$ ); ES, IB, EB on EXP are small or no effect ( $q^2_{ES \rightarrow EXP} = -0,00124$ ;  $q^2_{IB \rightarrow EXP} = 0,00124$ ;  $q^2_{EB \rightarrow EXP} = 0$ ); IS on IB, EB are small ( $q^2_{IS \rightarrow IB} = 0,03$ ;  $q^2_{IS \rightarrow EB} = 0,0212$ ); ES on IB, EB are very small ( $q^2_{ES \rightarrow IB} = 0,0044$ ;  $q^2_{ES \rightarrow EB} = -0,00203$ ).

## 5. Discussion

The research result shows that there are a direct and indirect relationships between government export support and export performance which are similar to some studies (Ali & Shamsuddoha, 2007; Haddoud et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2017). The direct effect of government export support on export performance

is stronger than the indirect effect ( $\beta=0.297$  vs.  $\beta=0.106$ ). This result is different from Karakaya and Yannopoulos (2012) on which this research is based and developed. Karakaya and Yannopoulos (2012)'s result showed that there is not a direct effect of government export support on export performance but there is an indirect effect and the total indirect effect, the standardized regression weight is 0.0548 which is smaller than this research. The existence of an indirect relationship has shown that the government export support increases stimuli, reduces export barriers, leading to the increase in the enterprise export performance despite the indirect effect is smaller than direct effect. However, only the perceived internal export stimuli make sense in this indirect effect. The government export support does not reduce the perceived export barriers in order to contribute to the increase in export performance. This is discussed with experts and is explained by the fact that Vietnamese SMEs have tried to overcome export barriers even though they have not yet been able to access government support programs.

Coinciding with previous research, government export support positively affects perceived internal and external export stimuli (Crick & Jones, 2000; Mencinger, 2003) with approximately equal effects of  $\beta=0.247$  and  $\beta=0.288$ .

The result also indicates that there are not negative relationships between government export support and perceived internal export barriers as well as government export support and external export barriers. It means that firms do not appreciate the government support highly to help them overcome internal and external export barriers. This result is different from Karakaya and Yannopoulos (2012), Shamsuddoha et al. (2009).

There is a positive relationship between perceived internal export stimuli and export performance which is consistent with previous research (Anil et al., 2016; Gilaninia et al., 2013; Stoian, 2010) but is different from these authors' research when there is not a relationship between perceived external export stimuli and export performance. With the effect of 0.419, it shows that firms highly appreciate the perceived internal export stimuli which can affect the results of their export activities. In addition, perceived external export stimuli do not affect export performance in this research. Through discussion with some experts, it was explained that the external export stimuli are not important factors affecting the export performance but in order to be successful in export activities, the factors of enterprise resources and capability have a more important decisive role.

This research result also shows that there are not relationships between perceived internal export barriers and export performance as well as perceived external export barriers and export performance. According to some manager opinion, although they perceive some export barriers, they realize more benefits than the difficulties they face and try to overcome barriers to achieve their successful export performance. This result is also consistent with Anil et al. (2016), Sinkovics et al. (2018), Jones (2018), Haddoud et al. (2018). Only the perceived internal export stimuli have a negative impact on perceived internal export barriers and the perceived external export stimuli have a negative impact on perceived internal export barriers. This finding is also consistent with the RBV theory which shows that if firms possess unique resources, they can overcome difficulties and barriers to achieve their success. The research result also indicates that there is an indirect relationship between government export support and perceived internal export barriers through perceived export stimuli. This means that although the government export support does not directly reduce the perceived internal export barriers, the government export support helps to increase the perceived internal and external export stimuli, leading to the decrease in perceived internal export barriers.

## 6. Conclusion, managerial and policy implications

Based on the theoretical background and empirical studies, the theoretical research model has been set up. The research results support the view that government export support increases the perceived export stimuli as resources and enterprise capacity increase, which in turn leads to the success in export performance (Czinkota, 1994). Therefore, government export support affects export performance directly and indirectly through firm perceived internal export stimuli. In addition, another result show that although there is not the direct relationship between government support and perceived internal export barriers, there is an indirect relationship between these two factors through perceived internal and external export stimuli.

Based on the research results, some managerial implications are suggested as follows:

First, based on the relationship between perceived internal export stimuli and export performance, enterprises need to improve their own resources. An enterprise is a collection of many resources and capabilities (Peteraf, 1993). In order to have a positive perception of internal resources that create the export stimuli, it is very important for enterprises to understand and identify the resources to gain competitive advantage and superior results. Therefore, business owners need to systematically analyze changes in export markets to allocate suitable resources for their performance, identify current and future needs and market trends, forecast changes in demand, look for new business opportunities in order to achieve successful export performance. Oviatt and McDougall (1994) also argued that SMEs need to develop resources and capabilities to overcome barriers and expand their international presence.

Second, based on the relationships between government export support and perceived internal export stimuli, government export support and perceived external export stimuli, government export support and export performance and indirect relationship between government support and perceived internal export barriers, SMEs should increase the use of support programs which leads to improve the enterprise capacity and resources. Therefore, SMEs will realize that the increase in internal export stimuli has a positive effect on export performance or it helps to reduce the perceived internal export barriers. Ali and Shamsuddoha (2007) proved that export support programs help businesses increase their knowledge, experience, relationships with customers, suppliers, regulators, etc. to overcome export barriers and have more perceived export stimuli.

Third, based on the relationship between government export support and perceived external export stimuli, there is a need to increase information support in export markets. In order to be perceived stimuli to export to foreign markets, supporting information about the markets is necessary to help SMEs understand market needs, leading to incentives to promote exports to foreign markets. Currently, SMEs receive a lot of information but selective and suitable information for export activities is still limited. Therefore, it is necessary to provide businesses with effective and beneficial information, especially information on market penetration, connection to the right customers... As the governing ministry, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and Ministry of Industry and Trade in Vietnam need to promote its leading roles in creating favorable conditions for agricultural export enterprises to operate better by constantly updating market information related to product quality, price, market demand and new business opportunities.

Fourth, based on the relationship between government export support and export performance, effective support programs should be provided. In order to do that, the Government should prioritize resources on providing export support programs that enterprises appreciate their huge benefits. In addition, the Government needs to improve the connection with SMEs, so that they can know about export support programs and how to approach support programs. Support programs are not only provided in big cities and provinces, but SMEs in small provinces also can approach them. In addition, it is necessary to set up a website on supporting SMEs to export agricultural products so that SMEs can easily access information, choose support programs that suits their needs and register to participate. Besides, it is necessary to set up a hotline which helps SMEs easily contact to find out support programs anytime, anywhere at their needs. Moreover, it is crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of support programs periodically. Support programs need to be regularly evaluated and adjusted to suit market development, enterprise needs and must be attractive to enterprises. Finally, it is important to learn from foreign experiences about support programs. Experiences to learn include program design, management, implementation and evaluation.

Fifth, from the relationship between government export support and perceived internal export stimuli, it is necessary to provide a variety of export support packages to increase enterprise resources. Singer and Czinkota (1994) suggested the essence of a variety of support program providing. According to these authors, export support should be viewed as in-store goods for enterprises to freely choose according to their preferences and needs. In order to raise resources to help increase perceived internal export stimuli, it is necessary to combine a variety of support programs, including information, training, trade and financial facilitation. However, with limited resources and time, it is difficult for the Government to fully and effectively provide all the above support programs. In this case, the order of priority for providing support programs is based on GS's outer loading (in Table 1) as follows: (1) Trade mobility-related

programs; (2) Information-related programs; (3) Education-and training-related programs; (4) Financial aid-related programs.

## 7. Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations. First, the sample size of this study is only 257 samples. Second, the sampling method is convenience and snowball sampling which are not good to have a completely exact result. These restrictions are due to limitation to approach the board of management members in SMEs.

In the future, it is necessary to increase the sample size and select the sample quota evenly across areas and use better sampling methods. In addition, research on knowing and using government support programs, the moderator role of government export support, other enterprise internal and external factors that affect export performance should be conducted in the future.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Impact statement

As an agricultural country with a rural population of nearly 70%, agriculture plays an important role in Vietnam. The average annual export value of agricultural products accounts for about 10% of Vietnam's total export value and ASEAN + 3 are the major export markets of Vietnam's agricultural products. Although since 2012, Vietnam has shifted from a trade deficit to a trade surplus, there is a trade deficit with ASEAN + 3 market. Based on the data collected from samples of 257 SMEs in the North, Central, Highland and the South in Vietnam, exporting agricultural products to ASEAN + 3, the result shows some relationships among factors of Government export support, perceived export stimuli, perceived export barriers and export performance. From the result, some managerial and policy implications are suggested to increase the export performance which helps to reduce the trade deficit with ASEAN + 3 market and brings benefits to SMES exporting agricultural products to ASEAN + 3.

## About the authors



**Dao Mai Xuan** is a lecturer of Faculty of Commerce at University of Finance – Marketing in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Her research interests include international business and management.

**Buu Le Tan** is a lecturer of School of International Business and Marketing at UEH University, Vietnam. His research interests include international business, marketing and management.

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