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Choices of Foreign Market Strategy Based on Network Commitment Modes in Inter-firm Alliances: Cases from Automobile Industry

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Abstract:
Many factors lead companies to strengthen ties in a cooperative venture or develop partnerships with domestic businesses in foreign markets. Networking, especially with key actors in a market, is an unavoidable part of doing business, although culture and commitment can affect inter-firm alliances. In this paper, the impact of culture on network commitments are investigated. This study is based on the experiences of seven companies, including two French, a Japanese, a Korean, and three Chinese firms. Data is collected through in-depth interviews by general and R&D managers and the collection of secondary data related to the process entry into foreign markets of chosen cases. Our findings demonstrate that while these firms have experienced different foreign market developments in recent years, their common preference is the direct foreign investment. Nevertheless, this choice greatly depends on the national and organizational culture of the host market, which also influences the network commitment. Therefore, this paper helps business managers to choose the right foreign market strategies. Due to the confidentiality and inability to access financial information and agreements related to each agreement, information presented here are based on conducted interviews.

Keywords: *Foreign market strategy, network commitment, foreign direct investment, automobile industry*

1. Introduction

Much research on the automotive sector has shown it to be central. Rota *et al.* (2016) found that automobile and related industries and services are of vital importance to the economy of many countries. In Europe, the automotive industry directly employs at least two million directly and almost ten million in related activities. It is the greatest supporter of R&D in private industry sectors (ACEA, 2008).

Market development is a necessary part of any business growth plan, especially in the automotive industry. One of the most important strategic decisions that a manager of a multinational automotive corporation must make is the selection of the mode of entry into a foreign market (Shane, 1994): companies can use an export, licensing, franchising, or joint venture mode (Buckley and Casson, 1998). The selection of one or another of these modes and the speed of entry into a foreign market depends on key variables such as networking and commitment (Lee *et al*., 2011). Business networking is the formation of inter-firm relationships with key business actors. Appropriate networking can significantly reduce agency costs that may be incurred during foreign market entry, as it clarifies the goals and attitude of an entrant to a partner firm as well as to the host government (Anderson *et al*., 1994).

Solberg and Durrieu (2006) showed that trust between network partners leads to commitment. Culture, both national (Kogut and Singh, 1988) and organizational (Appiah-Adu and Blankson, 1998), forms another variable that impacts a foreign market strategy. Previous studies (Ghauri *et al*., 2008; Hadjikhani *et al*., 2008) have found that the socio-political context can explain variations in the speed of a multinational corporation's entry into a foreign market. Likewise, Hofstede's (2001) model of national culture has been used in many articles to study the impact of culture on foreign market strategy (Kogut and Singh, 1988; Shane, 1994; Li *et al*., 2016). Hofstede's (2001) model consists of six dimensions. The cultural dimensions represent independent preferences for one state of affairs over another; these distinguish countries (rather than individuals) from each other. Present-day automobiles can be considered to be cultural icons that indicate the level of development of a particular state. Understanding interactions between cultures and the commitment of each party to inter-firm alliances can aid the estimation of the success of a strategy for the development of a foreign market.

Inter-firm alliances are arrangements in which two or more independent firms cooperate to perform business activities (Barnir and Smith, 2002). These alliances are widely regarded as important for sustaining business development (Franco and Haase, 2015).

According to a report by OICA (2015), the automotive industry is also a major innovator, investing over £77 billion in research, development, and production. The auto industry plays a key role in raising the technological level of other industries as well. Vehicle manufacturing is a major contributor to government revenues around the world, contributing well over £370 billion.

This paper studies the performance of multinational automotive corporations in a particular market due to their network commitments, considering cultural effects from a national point of view, e.g., the consumerism accepted by some cultures (Godazgar, 2007).

2. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

In a competitive landscape characterized by increased globalization, the choice of entry mode is a key strategic decision facing firms seeking to expand into international markets. Datta *et al*. (2009) indicated that prospectors are more likely to choose equity-based foreign market entry modes than defenders are. In addition, prospectors favor full-ownership entry modes, namely, greenfield investments and full acquisitions, over shared-ownership modes such as joint ventures and partial acquisitions. Similarly, Lee, *et al.* (2012) studied the role of business networking and commitment to local market when automotive multi-national companies (MNCs) enter an emerging market. Cases illustrating that speed of foreign market entry are significantly influenced by business networking between automotive MNCs and key business and socio-political actors, since different types of business networking determine the level of learning and commitment.

Networks have been studied for many years by sociologists, and in recent years, the network concept has been an object of great interest among scholars of organizational strategy (Gulati *et al*.,1998). Access to networks in international markets positively impacts the development of certain global strategies such as marketing control or positioning, whereas it does not enhance the creation of international strategic alliances. Access to critical customers is paramount in international markets. This is particularly true in a globalized world market, where limiting time to market is critical to pre-empt competitors from achieving strongholds in key markets that later become difficult to invade. It is crucial for an exporter to set up a network system that can bridge the gulf between it and local key customers in foreign markets. (Solberg and Durrieu, 2006).

Alliances between organizations are becoming an increasingly common way to extract greater value from the marketplace. Partner selection is an undeniably important stage in the process of creating successful alliances (Shah and Swaminathan, 2008). In alliance creation, previous participation and experience in inter-firm cooperation or other activities are one of the most important drivers (Larson, 1992). Goerzen's (2007) results illustrates not only that firms enter into repeated equity-based partnerships but also that those with a greater propensity to do so encounter inferior economic performance. Further, statistical tests indicate that the negative effect of repeated partnerships on performance is particularly strong in environments of greater technological uncertainty. While previous authors have highlighted variance in network characteristics as well as the capability of a firm to manage them, these issues have received little empirical attention and relatively little is known about what happens after the alliance is initiated. The phenomenon of alliance networks has received a much attention from several perspectives. Perhaps the most carefully considered aspect of inter-firm alliances is governance issues, which have been examined from a transaction cost framework, often in an international setting.

The characteristics of national cultures have frequently been claimed to influence the selection of the mode of entry into a foreign market (Kogut and Singh, 1988). National culture has been extensively studied in international strategy, and its impact on managerial and economic outcomes has been shown to be profound (Li *et al*., 2016). The increase in research on culture in economic studies has given rise to systematic investigation of the shared meanings that shape markets, economic decisions, and outcomes. National differences in levels of trust impact perceptions of transaction costs and thereby influence the desirability of internalization and the choice of mode of entry into a foreign market. The relaxation of the concept of opportunism in transaction cost economics suggests that if some cultures are less opportunistic and more trusting than others, they will resort less to hierarchies than other cultures in the same objective economic conditions (Shane, 1994).

Organizational culture has also been of interest to researchers. A study investigated the impact of a structural adjustment program (SAP) on business practices in an emerging African market and its findings provided evidence for the positive influence of SAP-induced strategies and certain culture types on the level of firm market orientation (Appiah-Adu and Blankson, 1998). According to Deshpande and Webster (1989), organizational culture is patterns of shared values and beliefs that help individuals understand organizational functioning, and provide them with norms for behavior in the organization. The importance of corporate culture as an organizational variable can be seen in that it serves as the critical element that management can use to shape the direction of their firms, due to the influence it has on the way in which organizations adapt to external pressures in the marketing environment. Corporate culture can help improve productivity, and if properly communicated, culture can be used to encourage all employees to subscribe to organizational goals. Appiah-Adu and Blankson (1998), using the work of Cameron and Freeman (1991) and Deshpande *et al*. (1993), illustrate the four classifications of culture that the competing values model proposes. These are shared beliefs relating to overall strategic emphases, corporate bonding, leadership styles, and dominant attributes in an organization (Table 1).

Type: Clan Dominant attributes: Cohesiveness, participation, teamwork, sense of family Leader style: Mentor, facilitator, parent figure Bonding: Loyalty, tradition, interpersonal cohesion Strategic emphases: Toward developing human resources, commitment, morale *Internal Maintenance: (Smoothing activities, integration)*	Type: Adhocracy Dominant attributes: Entrepreneurship, creativity, adaptability Leader style: Entrepreneur, innovator, risk taker Bonding: Entrepreneurship, flexibility, risk Strategic emphases: Toward innovation, *External Positioning: (Competition, differentiation)*
Type: Hierarchy Dominant attributes: Order, rules and regulations, uniformity Leader style: Coordinator, administrator Bonding: Rules, policies and procedures Strategic emphases: Toward stability, predictability, smooth operations	Type: Market Dominant attributes: Competitiveness, goal achievement Leader style: Decisive, achievement oriented Bonding: Goal orientation, production, competition Strategic emphases: Toward competitive, advantage and market superiority

Table 1: Organizational Culture Types

Influential factors in the strategy for entry into foreign markets, as found in previous findings mentioned above, are shown in Table 2.

Networking	**Culture**	**Commitment**
Actors - Market central government - Manufactures - Consumers Activities - Production - Sale - After Sale Services - R&D Resources - Financial - Non-Financial	Organizational Level - Clan - Hierarchy - Adhocracy - Market National Level - Power Distances Index (PDI) - Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV) - Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS) - Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) - Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Normative Orientation (LTO) - Indulgence versus Restraint (IND)	Actors Commitment Activities Commitment Resources Commitment

Table 2: Factors affecting on foreign market strategy

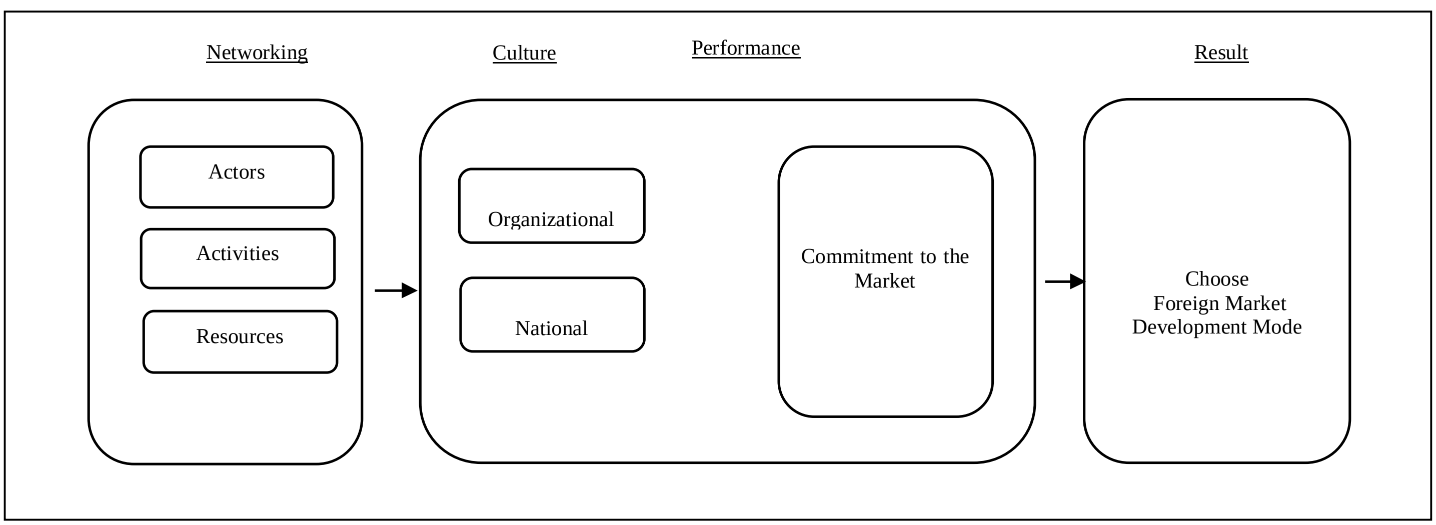

Figure 1: The impact of network commitment on choices of foreign market development mode

Following previous studies, we suggest a conceptual model (Figure 1) that deals with three distinct parts: the first is networking, which include three variables, namely, actors, activities and resources. The second part is performance, which consists of two parts, namely, culture and commitment. The third part is the result of the company's performance, along with the experience of networking in a market, which makes it the right choice for the mode of development of foreign markets.

3. Method

3.1. Research Setting

Our research design is both exploratory and qualitative. We attempted to address the questions of how and why and sought thick, in-depth insights (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010). This paper focuses on the Iranian automotive market, which, according to statistics collected by OICA (2016), is the sixteenth-largest automaker in the world and one of the largest in Asia. Beginning with the foundation of the Iranian automotive market, many companies, such as Citroen, Nissan, and Peugeot, worked to penetrate this attractive market. Between 2006 and 2016, the activities of these companies were greatly reduced, because of the sanctions of the IAEA against Iran. Exactly during that time, Chinese automotive companies gained a beachhead in the Iranian market, and their territory increased 2010, as they took advantage of the sanctions. Finally, the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015 and its implementation in January 2016, signaled the beginning increased interest in Iran by potential Western foreign investors (KPMG International, 2016), which means that multinational automotive corporations came to face a choice of the market entry and development.

The Saipa automobile corporation is the second-largest automaker in Iran and was established in 1966. To date, all its cooperation with foreign partners has been through licensing for contracts. In contract manufacturing under license, all of the responsibility and investment risk is with the recipient of the license. The licensor grants a license to produce products that are at the end of their lifecycle and those whose sales in their home market have declined. Thus, the level of technology in the licensee's country is not be in line with developmental trends in the industry worldwide. In recent years, Saipa policy has changed to attract foreign direct investment. MNCs have begun working with Saipa over different time periods, in different modes, and even at different locations, which gives great potential for analysis.

3.2. Data Collection

To explore the relationships among factors in foreign market investment, we decided to collect information with enough similarities and variations to yield a trustworthy enough comparison to support our conclusions (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri, 2008), so we chose seven MNCs that have agreements with Saipa: Citroen, Renault, Nissan, Kia, Changan, Brilliance, and Zotye. Citroën is a major French automobile manufacturer, part of the PSA Peugeot Citroën group since 1976, founded in 1919 by French industrialist André-Gustave Citroën. Saipa's cooperation with Citroen began in the early years of the establishment of the company. Renault, the French carmaker, works in the design, manufacture, and distribution of different classes of cars, commercial vehicles, trucks, trailers, tractors, and busses, and it operates electric vehicles. Saipa and Renault began their cooperation in 1976, with a licensing agreement. Nissan, the Japanese automaker, was established in 1933 has been part of the Renault–Nissan Alliance, a partnership with Renault, since 1999. After the institution of sanctions against Iran, Nissan stopped its cooperation with Saipa, but currently they are in talks to choose the best model of cooperation. Kia Motors, a subsidiary of Hyundai Motor Group, produces a variety of models of automobile, both luxury and commercial. Changan is a Chinese company that works in cooperation with automobile companies Ford, Suzuki, and Mazda, among others. Changan has launched design and research centers in Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Brilliance is another Chinese carmaker and major trading partner of BMW in China, whose cooperation with Saipa began in 2015. Zotye International Automobile Trading Company is a privately owned Chinese automobile manufacturer based in Yongkang, Zhejiang, China. It is owned by Zotye Holding Group and was established in 2005.

We conducted interviews with the general managers responsible for strategic planning and R&D managers in Saipa Group, in which we collected data on their experience, types of agreements they were familiar with, perspectives on organizational culture, and priorities in negotiation. The interview method, which was built on trust and mutual respect between the manager and interviewer, provided real insight into the face-to-face situation and improved our understanding of international negotiation (Ghauri, 2004).

As previously suggested by Ghauri (2004), our data was coded and categorized according to common characteristics for analysis. We show the basic case information of the studied companies in Table 1. The data were analyzed through pattern matching and systematic case comparison.

The origin countries of the case companies are France, Japan, China and Korea. They differ in terms of year of first contact with the Iranian automobile market, year of market entry, year of JV establishment, and type of market entry. This means that we have enough similarities (automotive IJVs in China) and variations (Table 3) to do a trustworthy comparison to draw conclusions (Sinkovics, Penz, & Ghauri, 2008).

	Citroen	Renault	Nissan	Kia	Changan	Brilliance	Zotye
Headquarters location	France, Paris	France, Paris	Japan, Yokohama	South Korea, Seoul	China, Chongqing	China, Liaoning	China, Yongkang
Beginning of business contact for entry	Around 1.5 years before launch						
First year of market entry	1968	1976	2001	1993	2014	2015	2013
Type of market entry as of the end of 2006	KD/CBU	KD/CBU (Up to 1996)	KD/CBU	KD	-	-	-
Type of market entry (2006–2016)	KD/CBU (Up to 2011) JV(After2017)	JV (after 2007) KD/CBU (2006 - 2017)	KD/CBU Up to 2014	KD	KD/CBU Up to 2017	KD/CBU Up to 2017	KD/CBU Up to 2017

Table 3: Sample characteristics

4. Findings

According to a report by OICA (2016), Iran has good infrastructure and the ability to supply the raw materials needed by the automotive industry. There are more than 800 active auto-parts-manufacturing units in Iran, which could be part of the supply chain to provision foreign automakers. In addition to the points made above, the geographical position of Iran for export to other regional countries spurred the willingness of foreign automakers to enter Iran's market. According to the Doing Business Report of the World Bank Group (2016), Iran facilitated exporting and importing by improving and expanding the services offered by the single national window. After signing of the JCPOA in July 2015 and its implementation in January 2016, MNCs became interested in foreign direct investment in Iran, but fear of the sanctions returning have slowed market entry.

The first step in market entry to Iran for an MNC automaker should be applying for a joint venture to the Industrial Development and Renovation Organization of Iran, a representative of the government. Another concern of foreign investors in participating in the Iranian car market is the strong role of government decision making in the automotive industry, even in vehicle pricing. Despite government intervention, there are weak laws to encourage foreign investment.

In past years, foreign automakers have focused on exports and licensing to already working within Iranian market, but according to long-term strategic plans of the government, global automakers should take on joint venture models instead. The countries pursuing auto industry development through joint ventures can be divided into two groups:

The first group, such as India and Brazil, which are attempting to attract direct investment, are not the owners of their automobile manufacturing. JVs with companies in these countries have been conducted with unequal contributions. Thus, global automakers to fundamental investment (green field) are in that country. The second group includes countries like China and Iran, the first by various means, such as contracts under the license has been the automotive industry and then decided to use their industrial development through foreign direct investment. Such countries do not need fundamental investment, because there is enough initial infrastructure for the development of the automotive industry. In these countries, the preferred model for attracting foreign direct investment is merger and acquisition (M&A).

Year	Event	Produced model
1968	Establishment of Citroen auto; vehicle production begun, based on licensing	Dyane
2001	New model released as production	Xantia
2006	New model released as CBU	C5
2016	Signing joint venture agreement with Saipa	-

Table 4: Citroen's introduction of products into the Iranian automobile market

Our research showed that global automakers have usually chosen host companies for FDI in Iran, due to their market share, resources, and good value chain in general. Saipa's market share reaches 40%, and grasping this segment of the market is not possible without networking: having access to local assets, such as trained human resources (more than 40,000 Saipa employees) and active factories are two examples. It is the case especially for foreign investors, who prefer M&A to the green field. An example would be Saipa Kashan, 50% of whose shares were sold in a joint venture agreement to Citroen in 2016 (Table 4). Choosing Pars Khodro (one of Saipa's active sites) as the premier site for the production of the L 90 in two consecutive years is yet another example of this type of cooperation. Generally, having manufacturing plants in different locations with different capacities is another reason for the interest foreign investors have in partnering with Saipa rather than networking with its domestic competitors.

Commitment to the opposite side is a success factor in foreign investment. For example, some MNCs did not fulfil their commitments after sanctions and left the Iran market, which now has affected their negotiations for joint ventures.

Year	Event	Produced model
1976	Vehicle production begun, based on licensing	Renault 5
1992	New model released as production	Renault 21
2007	New model released as production	L90
2006	New model released as CBU	Megane
2011	New model released as CBU	Koleos
2014	New model released as production	Sandero

Table 5: Renault's introduction of its products into the Iranian automobile market

Citroen was the first foreign partner of the Saipa group, with Dyane as its first product in 1968 (Table 4) and a joint venture agreement with Saipa. As Citroen has historically fulfilled its commitments to actors involved, it has maintained the interest of consumers, manufacturers, and even the government in its presence in the Iranian market. For example, Iranian consumers remembered the Citroen Xantia well, which was produced in 2001 (Table 4), and now they are expecting to see new Citroen models after the signing of the joint venture contract.

Iran has its own cultural features. Religion, as a subculture, influences consumers' perceived values, motivations, and beliefs about products. Predominantly Islamic markets and the consumers in them may be more complex and unique. For example, the findings of Teimourpour and Hanzaee (2011) support the notion that there are cultural differences between consumers in evaluating the dimension of luxury value. Teimourpour (2011)'s study concerns Iranian Muslim consumers, so it should be noted that the role of religion in consumer behavior has been debated and Teimourpour's (2011) findings are useful for domestic and international markets to produce a better understanding of the luxury value perception of Iranian consumers, based on cultural aspects. Luxury consumption is interesting. Consumers do not need luxury products for their survival, yet they consume them. Cars are one of the most obvious examples of luxury consumption in Iran. If you watch carefully on a highway for a few seconds, you will see many Mercedes Benz and DS (a premium brand of PSA) pass. Another such car was Nissan Maxima, produced in 2001 (Table 6), which was a luxury automobile and quite expensive, though Nissan had good sales on it. Most Saipa sales were in the less expensive car segment, such as the Kia Pride (Table 7). As a result, Saipa decided to focus on producing affordable cars with acceptable standards and options.

Year	Event	Produced model
2001	Vehicle production begun, based on licensing	Maxima
2002	New model released as production	Roniz
2007	New model released as CBU	Murano
2009	New model released as CBU	Qashqai
2010	New model released as production	Qashqai
2010	New model released as production	Teana

Table 6: Nissan's introduction of its products into the Iranian automobile market

Year	Event	Produced model
1993	Vehicle production begun, based on licensing	Pride
2005	New model released as production	Rio
2014	New model released as production	Cerato

Table 7: Kia's introduction of its products into the Iranian automobile market

According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Iran is a hierarchical society (Hofstede, *et al* 2010). This means that people accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. Thus, the acceptance by producers of government intervention and orders in the automotive industry is normal. Iran has a high preference for avoiding uncertainty. Countries exhibiting high uncertainty avoidance maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas. In such a culture, there is an emotional need for rules (even if the rules never seem to work), time is money, people have an inner urge to be busy and work hard, precision and punctuality are the norm, innovation may be resisted, and security is an important element of individual motivation; thus, ensuring after-sales service is very important for the Iranian people, and one of Saipa's strengths is its extensive after-sales network.

Dimension	Score
Power Distance	58/100
Individualism	41/100
Masculinity	43/100
Uncertainty Avoidance	59/100
Long Term Orientation	14/100
Indulgence	40/100

Table 8: Hofsted's 6-D national cultural dimensions model©

Another aspect of Iran's national culture is its long-term orientation, which captures how far each society maintains links with its past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future. According to table 8, Iran's very low score, 14, indicates that it has a strongly normative cultural orientation. People in such societies have a great concern with establishing the absolute truth, and they are normative in their thinking. They exhibit great respect for tradition, a relatively small propensity to save for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results. Due to this feature, these days most Iranians people prefer to spend their money on buying or replacing their car, instead of putting it in long-term investments.

Year	Event	Produced model
2014	New model released as CBU	Eado
2014	New model released as CBU	CS35
2016	Vehicle production begun, based on licensing	CS35

Table 9: Changan's product introductions into the Iranian automobile market

Year	Event	Produced model
2014	New model released as CBU	V5
2015	New model released as production	H200
2015	New model released as production	H300

Table 10: Brilliance's product introductions into the Iranian automobile market

Year	Event	Produced model
2013	New model released as CBU	Z300
2014	New model released as production	Z300 (Ario)

Table 11: Zotye's product introductions into the Iranian automobile market

A challenge that confronts humanity both now and in the past, is the degree to which small children are socialized. Without socialization, we do not become human. Hofstede's socialization dimension captures the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised. Relatively weak control is called "Indulgence" and relatively strong control is called "Restraint." Cultures can, therefore, be described as Indulgent or Restrained. Iran has a culture of Restraint. Societies that tend towards Restraint have a tendency to cynicism and pessimism. In contrast to Indulgent societies, Restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are Restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong. This feature caused Iranian consumers be skeptical about the Chinese cars, because Chinese carmakers entered the market later than their competitors (Table 9), (Table 10), (Table 11). However, Chinese MNCs tried to compensate for their backwardness through other features such as having a good financial resource for foreign investment in spite of the sanctions and approval by the government and producers.

The final result of this paper concerns organizational culture. Saipa was a hierarchical organization that had some particular features, as shown in Table 1, but after 2015 they decided to change to a market organization. Hierarchical culture, with its focus on smooth operations and predictability in bureaucratic organization is likely to lead to a low level of market orientation in a firm. On the other hand, a market culture, which is based on differentiation, competitive advantage, and market superiority, is expected to exhibit a high level of market orientation.

5. Conclusions

Many studies have been conducted that examine entry into foreign markets, and different variables have been linked to this issue. These are variables such as culture (Appiah-Adu and Blankson, 1998 and Shane, 1994), network, and commitment (Solberg and Durrieu, 2005); however, few researchers have examined these three variables together. In our view, commitment and network must be placed next to each other and examined bilaterally. According to the conceptual model (Figure1), networking is the first step to presence in a foreign market. Having a good relationship not only with business actors but also with host governments is very important (Ghauri and Holstius, 1996). In fact, without good interaction with the main actors, not even the possibility of remaining in the home market exists, let alone venturing into foreign investment. After networking, the obligations of the parties to each other and knowledge from the host culture will help improve performance. Finally, based on our investigations, we suggest to MNCs that for foreign investment not only network commitment but also host cultural market dimension (organisational and national) should be analyzed.

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