

Investigation the Relationship Between Strategic Orientation and Operational Performance in the Sudanese Service Firms

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Abstract

This study aims to examines the relationship between different dimensions of strategic orientation (market, service and learning) and operational performance constructs (flexibility, quality and cost) in the service sector in the Sudan, the study employed the quantitative methods via convenience sampling and self-administrated survey questionnaires were sent to 161 managers of service firms in Sudan response rate of 93 percent. Data from the study were collected analyzed using descriptive statistics, person correlation and path analysis through using (SPSS V. 23), (AMOS V. 25) in Structural Equation Modeling demonstrates some empirical supports to the model of this study. The Results of this study show that a partially significance between strategic orientation and operational performance in the Sudanese services firms. Market orientation and service orientation are a positively relationship with operational performance, while, the learning orientation not positive relationship with operational performance dimension. This study focuses only on the service sector. Also the data were only collected from single respondents in an organization. However, being the first study to explore the dimensions of strategic orientation and how those dimensions relate to operational performance efficiency, the study shapes the pathway for future research.

Keywords

Strategic Orientation, Market Orientation, Service Orientation, Learning Orientation, Operational Performance

1. Introduction

The service sector in Sudan consists of health, education, freight, transport, roads and bridges, buildings and construction, communications, and other services. Business organizations in Sudan are faced with intensity competition thereby making their surviving and growth of any organization dependent on their ability to offer greater value to customers. Many authors have emphasized that competition is at the core of the success or failure of firms, its determines the appropriateness of a firm's activities that can contribute to its performance, competitive advantage grows fundamentally out

of value a firm is able to create for its buyers that exceeds the firm's cost of creating it [18] there were many studies conducted in the field of strategic orientation and operational performance the prior literature investigated the strategic orientation often focuses on customer orientation, technology orientation, brand orientation and competitor orientation [21, 20, 28, 4, 17, 13], this study focus on three types of strategic orientation; market orientation, service orientation, and learning orientation as dimension of strategic orientation. Market orientation is considered because it is an important and involves obtaining and using market information, thus, should be important for operational performance [11] Service orientation is examined because it applicable in service-related

business activities and focus on synergistic effects that are important in operational performance [24] Learning orientation deserves consideration because it attempts to create and use new knowledge to develop new products/services, which should also be critical for operational performance [22]. Previous studies regarding strategic orientation have focused mainly on a specific sector, such as banking, hotel, and insurance sectors, this study covers multiple service sectors including hotel, post, banking, education, communication and insurance this a cerise gaps between previous studies and the current study. most of the prior studies like [7, 18] addressed the operational performance in general focused on the manufacturing firms where these studies neglected the service firms, which represent a true foundation of the national economy, as a play an active role in development of economic and social growth through providing and diversifying services, achieving developmental goals and creating job opportunities, while, this study focused on the studying operational performance in service firms, and this is what the previous studies have failed to deal with.

The objective of this study, therefore, is to examine the relationship between strategic orientation and operational performance in Sudanese service firms, which provide managers with guidelines for employing the most effective organizational focus. More specifically, we address the following research questions. What extend strategic orientation can contribute in operational performance? For this research question, this study operationalizes organizational focus as three types of strategic orientation. Therefore, the theoretical significance of this study is trying to fill the gaps between strategic orientation and operational performance and then attempt to build a conceptual framework that will contribute to theories and practice in the field of strategic management also the study will provide scientific guidelines and advices through which the services firms operating in Sudan to achieve the efficiency and the effectiveness. While the practical significance of this study; will make the managers aware about the change and complexity of business environment, managers can emphasize the importance of intangible resources in enhancing operational performance

In this article we explore the relationship between strategic orientation and operational performance in the Sudanese service firms; evaluating the impact of strategic orientation on operational performance in the Sudanese service firms. This study started with the introduction of the term strategic orientation and operational performance in the Sudanese service firms relying on the works of prior researchers. Then followed by the research methodology, analyses of data and consequently the discussion, conclusion and implication for management.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Strategic Orientation

Strategic orientation is one of the most powerful drivers of

growth and prosperity in the global economy. Strategic orientation according to different contexts is defined differently by authors; [17] defined as the principles underlying the activities, processes, and strategic directions that a firm undertakes to create behaviors necessary for achieving superior performance. [13, 21] defined it as the directions implemented by a firm to create the proper behaviors for the continuous superior performance of the business. [19] Refers Strategic orientation to the processes, practices, principles and decision making styles that guide enterprises' activities, especially in the context of the external environment and corporate development to substantially influence competitive advantage and competitive advantage of enterprises. This study proposed three dimensions; market, service and learning for strategic orientation construct as adopted by [10] in the following are the subsections of the Strategic orientation construct.

2.1.1. Market Orientation (MO)

Market Orientation (MO) can be defined as the organizational culture that most effectively and efficiently creates the necessary behavior for the creation of superior value for buyers and thus, continuous superior performance for the business [10] while, [21] also defined market orientation as a culture that first, places top priority on the profitable creation and maintenance of superior customer value while being mindful of the interests of other key stakeholders; and second, provides norms for behavior regarding the organizational development of and responsiveness to market information.

2.1.2. Services Orientation (SO)

Services Orientation (SO) is an organization-wide embracement of a basic set of relatively enduring organizational policies, practices, and procedures intended to support and reward service-giving behaviors that create and deliver service excellence, [10, 24] has conceptualized service orientation as employees' attitudes and actions that highly value the creation and delivery of excellent services.

2.1.3. Learning Orientation (LO)

Learning Orientation (LO) refers to organization-wide activity of creating and using knowledge to enhance competitive advantage, [10]. Learning orientation means the creation and utilization of knowledge and adaptation of organization for learning processes, One of the most important features of learning oriented firms is their ability to predict environmental and market changes and perform the necessary changes if required [14].

2.2. Operational Performance

Operational performance is a source of competitive advantage for the enterprise to differentiate itself in the eyes of the customers from its competitors by operating at a lower cost and hence at a greater profit. According to [9] operational performance is conceptualized as a three dimension construct that includes flexibility, quality and cost.

2.2.1. Flexibility

Flexibility is important operational performance measure, which is described as the ability of the company to adapt and respond to diversity or change, to give customers individual treatment, or to introduce new products/services flexible is systems can respond to special service requirements, product innovativeness and product variety, and thus achieve a variety of operating attributes [9]. [29] points that flexibility is the ability of the organization to responds quickly to changes on the characteristics of the products design or changes related to the size of customers' orders and the multiplicity of their desires.

2.2.2. Quality

Quality [5] argued that quality was the outcome of the evaluation process where the perceived service and the expected service were compared. Service quality has also been described as a form of attitude, as it is a global judgment on the superiority of the service provided by an organization. Service quality has been the focus of numerous studies since its early conceptualizations, as delivering positive levels of service quality creates a competitive advantage for an organization.

[3] Defined as the ability to offer products and services at the lowest cost and free of defects, and to ensure the achievement of discrimination to the organization under the existing competition in the market and represent the overall attributes and characteristics of the product and the service

that meets the needs of customers.

2.2.3. Cost

Cost is one of the most basic dimensions for competition and that many organization tried to rely on reducing their product cost to achieve competitive advantage, which means that the organization carry on the product and marketing of products at the lowest possible cost compared to its competitors enabling it to sell at a lower price, [9] cost defined as doing things cheaply, producing goods at a cost that enables them to be priced appropriately for the market while still allowing a return to the organization [9].

2.3. Resource Based View (RBV) Theory

Resource-based view provides the theoretical foundation for this study regarding the effect of strategic orientation on operational performance. The RBV suggests that firms deploy their physical, human, and organizational resources to gain an advantage in the marketplace. If these resources are valuable to customers, rare, and difficult to imitate, then these resources give rise to sustainable competitive advantage, enhancing firm performance, thus, the basic premise is that resources increase the efficiency and effectiveness of firms in general and the development of new services in particular, in this context [10]. Based on the literatures and (RBV) theory the study framework is shown in figure 1:

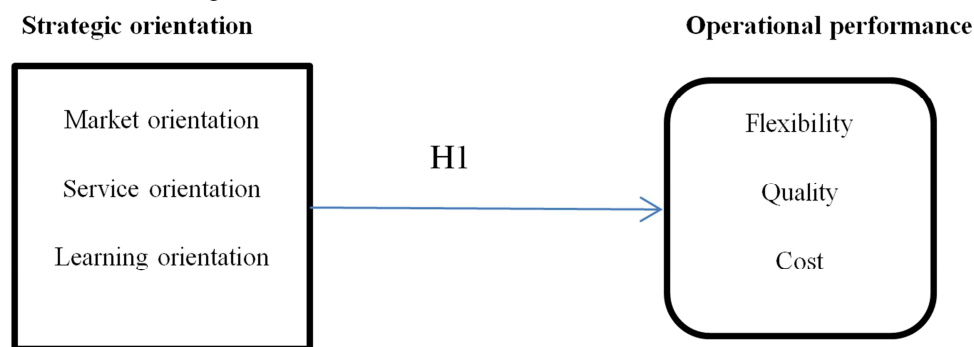


Figure 1. The study framework.

2.4. Hypotheses Development

1. Strategic orientation and operational performance

In literature a number of scholars [6, 8, 13, 2, 12] beside others, are discussed strategic orientation concept is important in developing strategic focus to enhance the organizational performance. [4] Indicates a positive relationship between strategic orientation and firm performance. While, [25, 21, 27] indicates a positive relationship between strategic orientation and performance. Based on the above discussions the following hypotheses are generated:

H.1. strategic orientation is positively related to operational performance.

H.1.1. there is a positive relationship between market orientation and flexibility.

H.1.2. there is a positive relationship between market orientation and quality.

H.1.3. there is a positive relationship between market orientation and cost.

H.1.4. there is a positive relationship between service orientation and flexibility.

H.1.5. there is a positive relationship between service orientation and quality.

H.1.6. there is a positive relationship between service orientation and cost.

H.1.7. there is a positive relationship between learning orientation and flexibility.

H.1.8. there is a positive relationship between learning orientation and quality.

H.1.9. there is a positive relationship between learning orientation and cost.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

Consistent with the purpose of this study, the study relied on the Positivism philosophy, deduction approach to theory development, mono method quantitative methodological choice, survey strategy and cross-sectional Time horizon. The data were collected through questionnaires sent to service firm's managers in 161 large service firms among Sudanese listed and registered corporations.

3.2. Variables and Measurement

The questionnaire for this study consisted of three main sections, firstly, the profile of the company secondly, specific questions designed to measure the strategic orientation and thirdly, specific questions designed to measure the operational performance. *strategic orientation* were measured by using three dimensions the constructs of strategic orientation (market orientation and learning orientation) are measured using three items adopted from [10]. While, the service orientation is measured using two items were adopted from [24]. *Operational performance* were measured by using three dimensions the flexibility is measured using three items were adopted from [7] while, quality is measured using five items were adopted from [23] and cost is measured using three items were adopted from [9] We use a five –point scale as a unit of measurement ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree and more worse to more better for (quality and cost).

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Respondents Characteristics

The data has been collected from service firms. And distributed 171 questionnaires to top managers after eliminating incomplete data, there were 161 complete and useable responses, representing a response rate of 93 percent. The data analysis shows the companies profile characteristics that: (property of firm), rate 90.1 percent respondents were national, followed by 6.8 percent respondent were foreign, while 3.1 percent respondent were intermixed that represent the lower ratios. Furthermore, the respondent's (experience

of firm), 20 and more are representing a rate 26.1 percent, from 11 to 15 representing a rate 25.5 percent, From 5 to 10 representing a rate 14.9 percent while to less than 5 years representing a rate 21.7 percent last in this group from 16 to 20 years are few number 19 frequencies and represented in 11.8 percent. The respondents (number of labourers), that fill up the questionnaires, majority of them were 200 and more are representing a rate 49.1 percent followed by form 101 to 150 and from 151 to 200 are representing a rate 13.7 percent, to less than 50 labourers are representing a rate 12.4 percent and from 50 to 100 were representing a rate 11.2 percent as lower ratios. Concerning the respondents (natural of work) majority of them were education which represent 44.1 percent, followed by banker were representing a rate 22.4 percent, then followed by hostelry were representing a rate 16.8 percent, insurance were representing a rate 8.7 percent, mailers 5.6 percent and communication were 2.5 percent represent the lower ratios. Regarding the (number of competitors), the majority of the respondents 20 and more 82.0 percent followed by from 11 to 15 were rate 8.7 percent, to less than 5 competitor were rate 5.0 percent and from 5 to 10 were rate 2.5 percent represent the lower ratios.

4.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

The Exploratory factor analysis has been performed to extract the loadings of factors with promax rotation. In conducting factor analysis, this study followed assumptions that recommended by [16] *Firstly*, there must be sufficient number of statistically significant correlations in the matrix. *Secondly*, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy should be at least 0.6. *Thirdly*, Bartlett's test of sphericity should be significant at 0.05. *Fourthly*, communalities of items should be greater than 0.50. *Fifthly*, the minimum requirement of factor loading 0.45 (since the sample size of this study 161 service firms managers) based on a 0.05 significant level, with value of cross loading exceeds 0.45. Also to provide a simple structure column for interpretation, the factors were subjected to promax rotation. *Finally*, eigenvalues should be more than 1 for factor analysis extraction. Factor analysis was done on the nineteen items, which were used to measure study variables. Table 1 showed the summary of results of exploratory factor analysis on study variables.

Table 1. Factorial loads of observed variables - promax Rotation.

Observable variables	Factorial loading
Market orientation (MO)	
MO2) We constantly monitor our level of commitment and orientation toward customers.	.639
MO3) We measure customer satisfaction systematically and frequently.	.848
MO4) We give close attention to after-sales service.	.613
Service orientation (SO)	
SO4) Our company has established service standards based on researched customer needs.	1.022
SO5) Service standards are visible to both employees and customers.	.458
Learning orientation (LO)	
LO4) An emphasis on constant innovation is a part of our firm culture.	.614
LO5) We basically agree that our firm's ability to learn is the key to our competitive advantage.	.809
LO6) Learning in our firm is seen as a key commodity necessary to guarantee firm survival.	.695
KMO, .736; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, 319.261; Total Variance Explained, 54.404.	
flexibility	

Observable variables	Factorial loading
F3) Our company can quickly introduce new products onto the market.	.686
F4) Our company can quickly respond to changes in market demand.	.691
F5) Our company can quickly respond to changes in competitors.	.686
Quality	
Q1) Improved service quality.	.516
Q2) Reduced costs of defects and rework.	.727
Q3) Reduced delivery lead time of finished products/services to customers.	.803
Q4) Reduced customer complaints	.558
Q5) A decline in the number of warranty claims.	.525
Cost	
C1) Labour productivity	.608
C2) Production cost.	.843
C3) Improved capacity utilization.	.641
KMO, .674; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, 154.091; Total Variance Explained, 50.854.	

Source: Survey 2018

4.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The statistical analysis software package was used (AMOA) to perform the process of confirmatory factor analysis for the model, as this package is used to test the hypotheses relating to the existence or non-existence of a relationship between the variables and underlying factors.

The confirmatory factor analysis is also used to assess the ability of the factor model to change from the actual dataset and also to compare several models of factors in this area. Figure 2: below show the confirmatory factor analysis for study variables

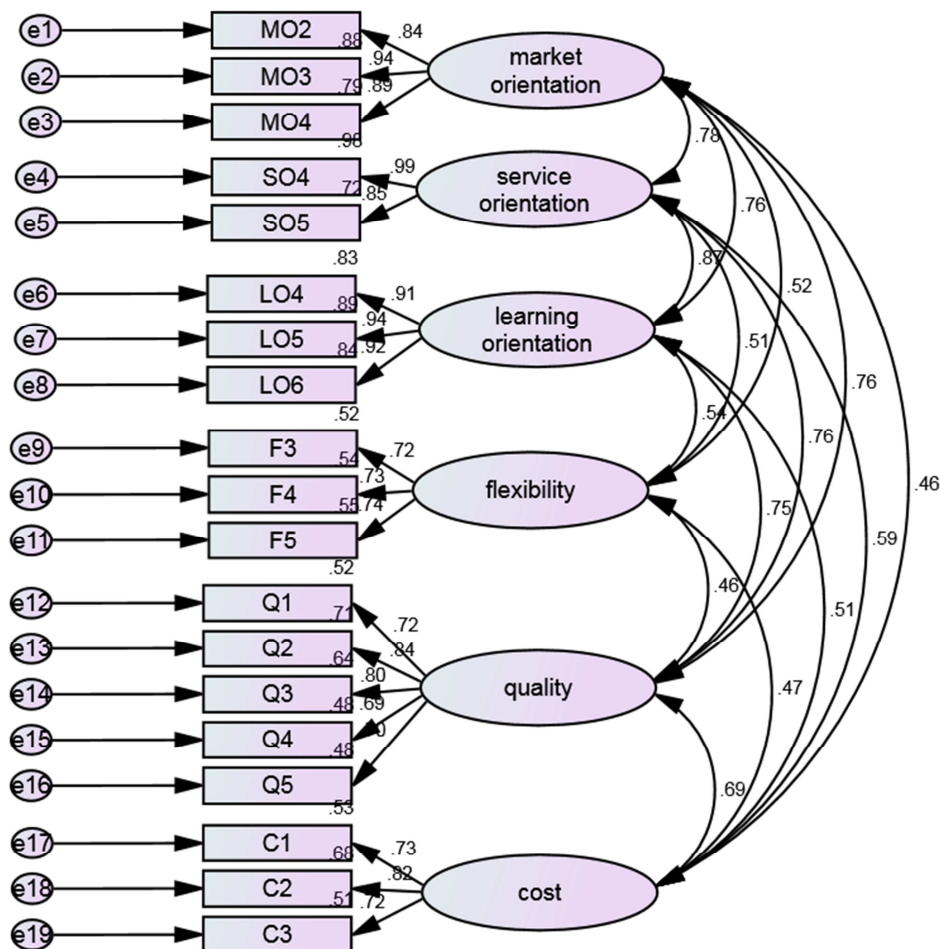


Figure 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis for study variables.

confirmatory factor analysis fit indices show that the measurements model fits the data well: Chi-square/degree of freedom (cmin/df) = 7.310; incremental fit index (IFI) = .558; comparative fit index (CFI) = .553; goodness of fit index (GFI) = .696; adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = .615; root mean of residual (SRMR) = .667; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .163; and P Close = .000.

4.4. Correlation and Reliability Analysis

The correlation analysis was used between the study variables with aim of identifying the correlative relationship between the independent and dependent variables, so whenever the closer the degree of correlation to the integer one, the stronger the correlation between the two variables, whenever the less the degree of correlation than the integer one, the weaker the relationship between the two variables, and the relationship may be direct or inverse. In general, the

relationship is weak if the value of the correlation coefficient is less than (0.30), and it can be considered medium if the correlation coefficient value ranges between (0.30 - 0.70), yet if the value of the correlation is more than (0.70) the relationship is considered strong between variables, and the correlation is considered positive if its value is negative.

The standard deviation, mean and Cronbach's alpha along with person correlation, for strategic orientation dimensions and operational performance constructs has been shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation and Reliability Analysis for study variables.

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Market orientation	.742	3.7896	.67558	1					
2 Service orientation	.650	3.0972	.51144	.441**	1				
3 Learning orientation	.755	3.4771	.57511	.419**	.569**	1			
4 Flexibility	.730	3.3976	.56938	.320**	.255**	.321**	1		
5 Quality	.768	3.4582	.48186	.552**	.481**	.469**	.278**	1	
6 Cost	.744	3.2335	.52335	.196*	.359**	.235**	.361**	.622**	1

Source: prepared by the researchers from data (2018).

5. Hypotheses Testing

After the preliminary analyses, this part discusses the hypotheses testing and findings of the study. The hypotheses were tested with the path analysis that discloses the effect of independent variables on dependent variables through the structural equation modeling (SEM) that grows out of and serves purposes similar to multiple regression, but in more powerful way which takes in account the modeling of interactions between variables, nonlinearities, correlated independents, measurement error, correlated error terms,

multiple latent independents each measured by multiple indicators, and one or more latent dependents also each with multiple indicators [15]. The main hypotheses in this study which assumes that the strategic orientation dimensions (market, service and learning) have positive relationship with the operational performance as shown in figure 3: below. Based on the below figure nine hypotheses were developed to be tested. Therefore, to test these hypotheses, a similar process of path analysis using (AMOS) was conducted to predict the impacts of strategic orientation dimensions on operational performance dimensions.

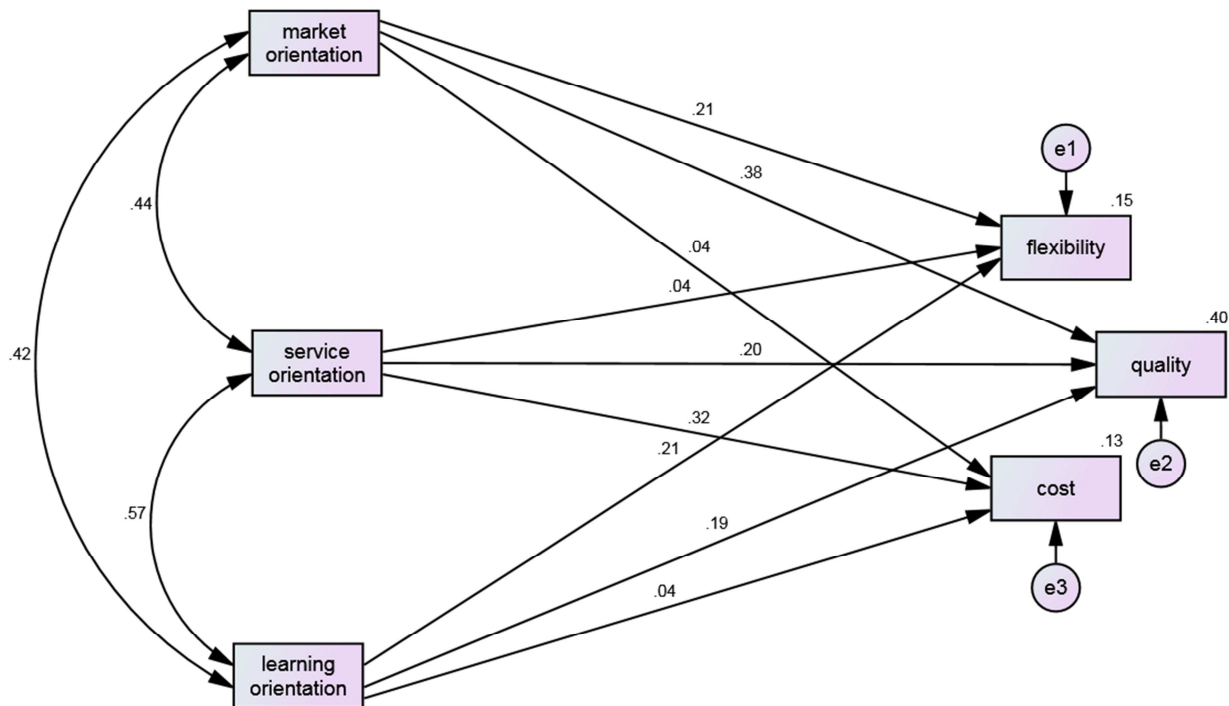


Figure 3. The Relationship between strategic orientation and operational performance.

The results of path analysis showing Model fit parameters consistent with recommendation as follow, CMIN= 88.095, DF= 3, CMIN/DF= 29.365, RMSEA=.421, GFI=.871, AGFI=.098, RMR=.029, NFI=.727, IFI=.734, CFI=.724, and PCLOSE=.000.

On the other hand, The results indicate that not positive relationship between market orientation on flexibility with the values (estimate =.180, $p>0.05$), not positive relationship between market orientation on cost with the values (estimate =.030, $p>0.05$) and positive relationship between market orientation on quality with the values (estimate =.273, $p<0.001$), not positive relationship between service orientation on flexibility with the values (estimate =.048, $p>0.05$), not positive relationship between service orientation

on quality with the values (estimate =.190, $p>0.05$) and positive relationship between service orientation on cost with the values (estimate =.329, $p<0.001$) and not positive relationship between learning orientation with all dimensions of operational performance (flexibility, quality and cost) with the values (estimate =.205, $p>0.05$; estimate =.163, $p>0.05$; estimate =.033, $p>0.05$), respectively. These results give partially supported to hypotheses, Table 3 explain the path analysis for direct effects.

Table 3. Path analysis for direct effects.

	Relationship		Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p-value
cost	<---	learning orientation	.033	.084	.390	.696
quality	<---	learning orientation	.163	.064	2.535	.011
flexibility	<---	learning orientation	.205	.090	2.273	.023
cost	<---	service orientation	.329	.095	3.452	***
quality	<---	service orientation	.190	.073	2.605	.009
flexibility	<---	service orientation	.048	.103	.467	.640
cost	<---	market orientation	.030	.065	.464	.643
quality	<---	market orientation	.273	.050	5.453	***
flexibility	<---	market orientation	.180	.070	2.559	.011

Source: prepared by the researchers from data (2018).

6. Discussion

The finding show that there is a partial significantly and positive relationship between strategic orientation (market orientation, service orientation and learning orientation) and operational performance (flexibility, quality and cost). Specifically, this study found that market orientation is the direct impact on operational quality exhibiting strong effect with the values (estimate =.273, $p<0.001$) The finding concurs with previous studies [13] that indicate market orientation leads to firm performance, while [4] have shown that there is a significant relationship between the market orientation with the performance, and [2] show that market orientation has a positive effect on business performance compared to technology and alliance orientations within SMEs in the Dubai marketplace. And which argue with [8] that indicate not positive relationship between strategic orientation and operational performance it differs between it and current study in cultural and environmental factors. While some prior studies like [1, 12, 21] indicate that the positive relationship between strategic orientation and performance. The finding also signifies the importance of service orientation as a distinct element of strategic orientation in developing operational coat with the values (estimate =.329, $p<0.001$), this results coinciding with previous studies like [24] indicate that positive relationship between service orientation and measurement in the context of business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce in service firms. While, the some previous studies indicated that there are a partial relationship between strategic orientation and performance such as [17, 26]. Finally, according to the results the learning orientation has not significant effect on operational performance this result aligned with [14] showed that the relationship between learning orientation and

performance is statistically insignificant. And which argue with [21] that indicate the positive relationship between strategic orientation (learning orientation) and performance; it differs between it and current study in dimension.

7. Conclusion and Implication for Management

This study has provided empirical justification for a framework that identifies three dimensions of strategic orientation and describes the relationship among strategic orientation and operational performance constructs within the context of service sector in the Sudan. Previous studies supporting the importance of strategic orientation mostly used and relate strategic orientation to organizational performance, the major contribution of this study is the development of a dimension of strategic orientation constructs through comprehensive combination perspective; based on a survey data of 161 service firms, this study carries more weight especially for generalization purpose due to the limited quantitative philosophy and deduction approach in the extant literatures. As a whole, strategic orientation has important implications for operational performance. This study offers a number of managerial implications. *First*, this study will help decision makers in firms to know the importance of strategic orientation and how strategic orientation influence the operational performance Therefore, decision makers should focus on improve their strategic orientation. *Second*, the study highlights the importance of managerial emphasis on the creation of a strategic oriented business environment and encouragement of innovative activities. Given that strategic orientation helps managers to be more connected to the business environment such as dimension of strategic orientation appear to play an important

role in allowing service firms to devise innovative solutions to business problems.

This study is subject to several limitations and leaves some areas in need of further research. *First*, this study tests the role of strategic orientation in service context. Research in other settings (e.g. manufacturing) could expand the scope of strategic orientation. *Second*, this study use of only one respondent per company, which might be a cause of possible response bias. Thus, caution should be taken in results interpreting. Future research should endeavor to collect data from multiple members. *Finally*, this study focuses on service firms in Sudan. Future research may include firms from other industries or regions to generalize the findings. It would provide valuable information for managers regarding the mapping of strategic orientation with operational performance.

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